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**ECOLOGY IN ASIAN TRADITIONS:
Perspectives on Chinese and Buddhist Environmental Philosophy**

Guest editor Eric S. Nelson

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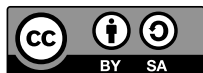
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SPECIAL ISSUE
ECOLOGY IN ASIAN TRADITIONS:
Perspectives on Chinese and Buddhist
Environmental Philosophy

Guest Editor's Foreword

Introduction: Perspectives on Chinese, Buddhist, and Environmental Philosophy

Eric S. NELSON

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Chinese Philosophy, Ecological Crisis, and Transformative Critique

Appeals to the significance of a culture, tradition, or way of life can simultaneously edify and alienate different audiences as they serve an identity-forming and other-excluding function. The imaginary that some cultures are civilized and complex and others natural and simple has been complexly mediated through the historical entanglements and interactions between, on the one hand, colonialism and Eurocentrism and, on the other, varieties of anti-colonial resistance and the postcolonial formation of contemporary national, cultural, and religious identities. It is in this context that claims of the ostensible intrinsic naturalness and “greenness” of a culture or tradition are perceived and debated.

One need not read Marx, Nietzsche, or thinkers engaged in the hermeneutics of suspicion to recognize that arguments and ideas about “green” identities can serve the ideological interests of powerful states, movements, and corporations. Accordingly, to consider one example, indigenous and multicultural assertions about the natural and ecological character of Chinese and other Asian philosophies and religions often appear to have a “greenwashing” and identity-maintaining function that have little to do with current environmental practices and confronting proliferating climate and ecological crises. Legitimate suspicions about cultural essentialism, national identity, and their ideological uses, and not only Eurocentrism, have placed discussions of Asian philosophy and contemporary ethical and political issues into question. Recent discourses of Chinese “Ecological Civilization” (*shengtai wenming* 生態文明), “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會) in harmony with nature, and an authoritarian Green Leviathan seem to critical observers to be more Leviathan than genuinely ecological.

Present ecological desperation might inspire visions of eco-authoritarianism and eco-totalitarianism. Yet the state has yet to resolve the aporias of power, bureaucracy, and corruption (trenchantly analyzed by Max Weber), just as the market has failed to answer its social-economic and environmental crisis-tendencies, and

the public has still not adequately realized its participatory self-organizing tendencies for itself or for cultivating a less anthropocentric and more appropriate culture and ethos of local and global environments and ecosystems. One key to such a shift would be a more participatory and relational conception and experience of identity, including personal and collective identities. Such experiences of relational self-and-world have been articulated in different ways in classical Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian teachings and models concerning animals, landscapes, and nature discussed in the essays in this special issue.

Cultural essentialism, whether in the form of Eurocentrism or indigenous nationalism and fundamentalism, assumes reified images of the primacy of the social (above the relational life of individuals) and of culture or tradition as having only one genuine form and *telos*. Furthermore, a naïve and dogmatic multiculturalism can replicate cultural essentialism and maintain the priority of conformity and continuity in dominant national cultures and identities, thereby legitimating domination and exploitation against individuals and communities regarded as “other”. Cultural essentialism and social identitarianism are incompatible with the alterity and plurality constitutive of the human condition (as in Arendt 2013). This condition calls instead for pluralistic and participatory models of culture and sociality that recognize the legitimacy of reforms and transformations that depart from previously established authorities and identities.

As Chinese, Indian, and other teachings disclose, humans are not only participants in anthropocentrically delimited intersubjective human relations. They participate in environmental relations that help nourish or disrupt ecosystems and environments on an increasingly global scale. Consequently, although these teachings can serve ideological functions, they also have a critical transformative potential.

The reproduction of human existence transpires in, to introduce Marx’s analysis, socially conditioned metabolic interactions and interruptions within the environmental natural world. The interruptions that distinguish modern forms of life are experienced as alienation from the environment and nature. Alienation is therefore not only a failure of intersubjective relations of respect and recognition as in the ethical-political models inspired by Kant and Hegel. It concerns alienation from one’s own bodily life, others and things, and the environment.

The already ongoing and rapidly escalating climate and ecological crisis-tendencies of the Anthropocene are complex phenomena that necessitate multifaceted responses. Scientific environmental inquiry, developing biomimetic and green technologies, and reorienting the economic reproduction of social life are, without doubt, pivotal. Yet such practices and institutions are interwoven with cultural, ethical, poetic, and social-political relations. As I have argued elsewhere, this

situation indicates the need for a renewed ethos and culture of nature or how we participate in environmental relations that can draw on suggestive and potentially transformative examples and models from paradigmatic and “heterodox” Daoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and other global transmissions.

Contemporary discourses concerning Daoist ecology, Confucian democracy, or Buddhist animal rights, to name only a few examples, are inevitably controversial and contested in how they merge diverse registers and sensibilities. Their controversial status is part of the very provocativeness and productivity of such discussions. Dialogue and critique also reveal how they have more than merely ideological identity-maintaining roles.

The ideological and critical function of these teachings are inevitably interwoven in ways that require critical intercultural dialogue and participatory public deliberation and discussion by their proponents and critics such that they do not merely oppress the living and the future in the name of culture and tradition. Zhang Junmai 張君勱, an advocate of Chinese constitutional social democracy and the democratic nature of the Chinese tradition, contended in 1962 that a fundamental problem of Chinese modernity was the failure to integrate democracy, science, and its indigenous ethos and way of life (Chang [Zhang] 1962, 5–9). The conflicts between radical traditionalists and modernists, in their mutual one-sidedness, had only undermined both tradition and modernization. Be that as it may, this point can be further generalized. It is not only the aporias between tradition and modernity that are at issue today, but the very question of an appropriate ethos and way of life given contemporary crisis-tendencies.¹

Perspectives on Chinese, Buddhist, and Environmental Philosophy

In the first contribution to this special issue, “Reflections on Waterscape Aesthetic in Chinese Tradition”, Wang Keping suggestively explores the natural sensibility and ecological sense of the aesthetics, poetics, and moral symbolism of waterscapes in Chinese literary and philosophical sources. Water nourishes life, delights, and is a symbol of the good. Its example guides and can refresh our sense of ourselves in contact with our environing world.

We turn from water to sky in the second paper. In “Boundary of the Sky: Environmentalism, Daoism, and the Logic of Increase”, Paul D’Ambrosio elucidates

1 Note that I explore these points in greater detail in *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* (2021); and in the first part (on environmental ethics and politics) of *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (2020).

the ways in which the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* fail to address current environmental issues and the ways in which thinking with these texts can help us to coordinate human and non-human systems and interrogate present attitudes and practices linked with assumptions about unlimited growth and increase.

Ellen Zhang continues to evaluate the ecological possibilities of early Daoist sources in the third article. In “The ‘Greening’ of Daoism: Potential and Limits”, she illuminates how two primary Daoist concepts, *ziran* and *wuwei*, can work to defuse destructive attitudes and promote nourishing attitudes both in their own historical context and in response to contemporary environmental concerns.

In the fourth essay, “The Biopolitics of Nourishing Life: Daoism as Environmental Philosophy”, Manhua Li investigates the bioethical and biopolitical dimensions of “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生) as a self-cultivating practice in the philosophy of Ji Kang 嵇康. She traces, contrary to depoliticalizing interpretations, its significant personal and social-political implications and its potential as an alternative contemporary biopolitical model and praxis.

Turning to the fifth paper, in “Green Orientalism, Brown Occidentalism and Chinese Ecological Civilization: Deconstructing the Culturalization of the Anthropocene to nurture Transcultural Environmentalism”, Jean-Yves Heurtebise further pursues social-political questions concerning the entanglements of Chinese and environmental philosophy. He interrogates processes of the culturalization of the Anthropocene in contemporary sinology and in discourses of “Chinese Ecological Civilization”.

In the sixth article, “*Fengshui*: A Moral Technique-Art (*jiyi* 技藝) for Contemporary Environmental Awareness”, Selusi Ambrogio pursues an intercultural genealogy of *fengshui* or geomancy as a contemporary cultural hybrid concept that unfolds from ancient Chinese thought through Neo-Confucian philosophy to contemporary ecological reimaginings, reinterpreting *fengshui* as a moral practice with ecological consequences and, in relation to Heidegger’s later thought, a practice of worldly dwelling.

In “Ecological Implications of the Logic of Non-Duality: An Analysis of the Plotinian One and the Daoist *Dao*”, the seventh contribution to this special issue, Ann Pang-White clarifies the connections between language and reality and considers the environmental significance of dualism and categorical logic in Hellenistic and Chinese discourses. She contrasts dualistic and non-dual logics in relation to the prospect of developing a new more responsive ecological logic and eco-philosophy.

The eighth essay turns from East to South Asian philosophy. In “Presentation of ‘Living Being’ in Early Indian Buddhism and Its Ethical Implications”, Tamara

Ditrich explains the semantic range and ethical significance of “living beings” in the Pāli Buddhist canon. She shows how selfless living beings function as inter-linked complex dynamic systems that operate as the ethical basis for Buddhist practices such as non-violence and non-harm and that can contribute to contemporary animal and environmental ethics.

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SPECIAL ISSUE
ECOLOGY IN ASIAN TRADITIONS:
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Engaging Daoism and Environmental
Philosophy

Reflections on Waterscape Aesthetics in Chinese Tradition

WANG Keping*

Abstract

Philosophy is akin to poetry due to their respective endeavour to express the ultimate good sense which we term civilization. This can be exemplified through the Chinese vision of waterscapes which is found running through Chinese philosophy and poetry alike. As observed in Chinese tradition, the Daoist water allegory is referred to “the supreme good”. It can be further explicated with reference to the Confucian appreciation of “huge waterscapes” in terms of moral symbolism. All this permeates through the poetic depictions of waterscapes in the beautiful, majestic, and musical categories from an aesthetic perspective. Such depictions bear philosophical, moral, and aesthetic values altogether as a result of their underlying linkage with “the ultimate good sense”, and therefore have played an important role in human life from past to present. They are often employed as aesthetic objects as they delight the sight, hearing, mind and spirit. Moreover, they are utilized to revive the sense of Being and homeliness in closer contact with the nature in which we reside.

Keywords: water allegory, moral symbolism, beautiful waterscapes, majestic waterscapes, musical waterscapes

Razmišljanja o estetiki vodnih prizorov v kitajski tradiciji

Izvilleček

Filozofija je podobna poeziji, predvsem zahvaljujoč njunemu skupnemu prizadevanju izraziti najvišji dobri smisel, ki ga imenujemo civilizacija. To je mogoče ponazoriti s pomočjo kitajskih pogledov na vodne prizore, ki jih lahko najdemo tako v kitajski poeziji kot filozofiji. Z vidika kitajske tradicije se daoistična vodna alegorija obravnava kot »najvišje dobro«. Nadalje jih je mogoče razlagati tudi z nanašanjem na to, kako »velike vodne prizore« v smislu moralnega simbolizma cenijo v konfucijanstvu. Vse to prežema poetične ponazoritve vodnih prizorov znotraj kategorij lepega, veličastnosti in glasbe, če so le-te obravnavane s stališča estetike. Tovrstne ponazoritve nosijo filozofske, moralne in estetske vrednosti kot rezultat njihove temeljne povezave z »najvišjim dobrim smislom«, zaradi česar so igrale pomembno vlogo v človekovem življenju od preteklosti do sodobnosti. Takšne ponazoritve so pogosto uporabljene kot estetski objekti, saj kot

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takšni vzbujajo radosti pogleda, sluha, razuma in duha. Poleg tega pa so pogosto rabljene z namenom obuditi občutek Bivanja in domačnosti v bližnjih srečanjih z naravo, znotraj katere prebivamo.

Ključne besede: vodne alegorije, moralni simbolizem, čudoviti vodni prizori, veličastni vodni prizori, vodni prizori v glasbi

As acknowledged conventionally from past to present, Chinese cultural heritage features a trinity of literature, history and philosophy (文史哲) owing to their internal interaction and inseparable linkage, especially in the scope of heuristic verbal expression that sheds light on cognitive experience and reflective thinking. All this is largely embodied in the wide use of literary allegory, historic allusion and philosophic aphorism, among many other features of Chinese culture. As to the linkage between philosophy and poetry (typical of literature), for instance, it so happens to be strongly affirmed by Alfred Whitehead, for his own reasons. When reconfirming the purpose of philosophy in a conclusive statement, he claims that it aims to rationalize mysticism by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations that are rationally coordinated. In his observation, “philosophy is akin to poetry” as “both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization. In each case there is reference to form beyond the direct meanings of words. Poetry allies itself to meter, philosophy to mathematic pattern” (Whitehead 1968, 174).

To my mind, what is meant by “the ultimate good sense” here pertains to at least two domains: one is the epistemological with regard to the human cognitive repertoire, and the other is the ethical with respect to human moral conscience. Under such circumstances, it tends to strengthen the connection between philosophy and poetry up to the degree that it will enhance, if not determine, the level of both human cognition and human morality. As to the “reference to form beyond the direct meanings of words” in each case, it implies something more meaningful and significant than words themselves in philosophy and poetry altogether. More specifically, it entails highly suggestive and symbolic significance outside of the literal meanings available in the dictionary coverage. In the case of philosophy, it points to the thought-provoking mechanism of the philosophic message concerned; and in the case of poetry, it is related to the polysemic organic context of the poetic realm engaged. When both of them strive to express “the ultimate good sense”, they tend to manifest the inherent and interactive linkage between them.

As discerned in their respective discourses, philosophy can be both mysterious and poetic to the extent that it goes beyond “mathematic pattern” alone, and correspondingly, poetry can be both mysterious and philosophic to the extent that it

goes beyond “metre” alone. That is to say, philosophy can be poeticized, and poetry philosophized. For philosophy cannot do without the exercise of cross questioning, critical reflection, dialectic pondering, intellectual intuition and even mystical fantasy if it endeavours to “maintain the active novelty of fundamental ideas illuminating the social system” while “reversing the slow descent of accepted thought towards the inactive commonplace” (ibid.). Likewise, poetry cannot do without the use of human emotion, in-depth intention, powerful imagination, intriguing imagery and aesthetic intuition when it strives to create the poetic realm *par excellence* so as to illuminate the human condition and enlighten the human spirit *per se*. All this is, for example, deeply set and typically embodied in the Chinese vision of waterscapes. Looking into it from an aesthetic viewpoint, we find the vision in its own right threading through Chinese philosophy and poetry alike.

In Chinese tradition, the natural landscape is known as *shan shui* (山水), comprising mountainscapes and waterscapes. It often plays an important part in human living, because it offers natural beauty and provides the sense of being at home in nature. It is for this reason that poetic couplets and philosophical expressions are seen inscribed on huge rocks spreading over the scenic spots and tourism attractions across China. It therefore enjoys an intense and constant affinity among Chinese people in general. This can be traced back to the aesthetic ideas of both Daoism and Confucianism on the one hand, and to the picturesque images of Chinese classical poetry on the other.

As regards waterscapes in particular, they appear in various forms of water sources as a consequence of aesthetic contemplation. They are considered to be dynamic by nature and thus perfuse emotional vitality to natural landscapes at large. To the extent that both Daoism and Confucianism are preoccupied with the moral aspects of water, Chinese poets in history, particularly those during the span of Tang and Song dynasties ranging from the 7th to 13th centuries, have been inspired to create fascinating images of waterscapes according to their individual contemplations, feelings, intentions, imaginations and even fantasies. They have therefore composed numerous poems and left behind a rich legacy for later generations of readers. Such poems have been widely read and appreciated from past to present mostly because of “the ultimate good sense” expressed. If you encounter school children anywhere in China and ask them to recite some of these poems—which are usually well-known for being short, rhythmic and picturesque—then you’ll find they can do so easily, as a result of having learned these classical pieces from their parents, teachers and relevant anthologies.¹

1 In the autumn of 1998, I was invited to work as an English translator and help a crew from a TV station in Bavaria (Germany) make part of a documentary series entitled *Poetry and Children in the World*. I escorted the crew headed by Dr. Richard Blank to visit more than ten cities, towns and

The Sense of Nostalgia qua Homeliness

Recent years have witnessed a new phenomenon as part and parcel of the cultural creativity enterprise across China, chiefly spurred by a Chinese poetry recitation contest, televised nationwide and at primetime during weekends. It is extremely popular with numerous audiences as it involves an enormous number of participants from all walks of life, ranging from kindergarten kids, elementary pupils, and college students to public servants, traffic policemen, railway workers, geological fieldworkers, rural peasants and the retired. Moreover, audiences enjoy giving their own responses to the questions that are asked in the show, and reciting the poems themselves. The program in this way provokes what is effectively a tri-way form of communication among the contestants, hosts and viewers, and therefore continues to attract large audiences from all over the country.

Why is a show about reciting poetry so popular? It is assumed that those pre-occupied with classical Chinese poetry are seeking “the ultimate good sense”. Moreover, such a sense can be situationally extended, in my opinion, to the sense of nostalgia as a form of homeliness among the Chinese populace at large. In their mentality, the sense of this type is not merely deep-rooted owing to the influence of their cultural tradition, but also growing fast due to the magic power of landscape poetry associated with people’s imagined homelands in “the good old days”. It is essentially attributed to the aesthetic charm of picturesque scenery in the poetic characterization of the past, and also to the rare presence of such scenery in the face of eco-environmental deterioration, not to speak of technological dominance, urban expansion and interference from other civilizations, among other factors.

As luck would have it, there has recently been a progressive improvement in the eco-environment in recent years across China, which has increased popular enthusiasm for reciting classical poetry, and thus strengthened the sense of nostalgia as a form of homeliness among the people with varied backgrounds. Accordingly, more and more Chinese citizens are becoming highly aware of the great importance of having a beautiful home with green mountains and blue waters, which leads them to embrace the natural beauty of their homeland that is considered

villages across China. According to the prerequisites of the fieldwork, we planned to ask the children we encountered by chance in all these places to recite their favourite poems in order to render the documentary as natural and authentic as possible. The age of the children ranged from 4 to 12 years old. Most of them were from primary schools, and some from kindergartens. Their performance was so impressive that the whole group was delighted throughout the entire journey. One of my German colleagues was so amazed by one of the landscape poems recited by a kindergarten kid, and requested me to write down the English version because he would like to share it with his girlfriend as a reminder of his good experience in a scenic spot with a poetic ambience.

to be the fundamental source of real joy, a happy life, health, security, and even longevity. This awareness helps people live poetically in some ways by virtue of reviving the old poetic descriptions, and encourages them to build up an environmental consciousness for the sake of both the earth and their own quality of life.

Quite incidentally, this growing sense of nostalgia as homeliness reminds me of Heidegger's concern with the idea of "homeliness" itself. For his concern can serve as a thought-provoking inspiration that carries in itself some in-depth relevance to the current discussion. As noted in Heidegger's critical ponderings, the dominant function of technology sees nature as "equipment" for people to gratify their practical needs and utilitarian purposes. For example, a river is revealed as a source for generating electricity aside from its attraction to the tourism industry. To his mind, the emergence of "homelessness" is so problematic that it goes as far as to drive humans into "the forgetfulness of Being", which is accordingly conducive to losing the sense of the mysterious source of things and beings. This sense itself once sustained human beings in their confidence that their lives had something to answer to and be measured by. Now it is a critical necessity to restore this sense as an alternative to ameliorate the human condition. As noted in one of his essays, Heidegger pays much attention to the "great hidden stream which moves all things along and makes a way for everything" (Heidegger 1971, 92). "This reflects his fascination with Daoism" according to his son who relates it to a "well" with respect to his father's metaphor for the "great hidden stream", a metaphor that has special significance due to its link with the Way or Dao for everything (Cooper 2012, 31).² In fact, the "well" in question is found in the garden of a small chalet on the edge of a village high in the mountains of the Schwarzwald. It is extended to a pumping pipe from which its water source keeps flowing down into a rectangular container lying amid the grass beside a flower-lined path.

The chalet was built in 1922, and over the next 50 years most of Heidegger's writing was done there. It was not simply that the place afforded peace and quiet in which to work. More importantly, as Heidegger once explained in a radio broadcast, his work up there was "sustained and guided" by the landscape, where he "experienced the great comings and goings of the seasons", and where mountains, trees and lakes "penetrated daily existence". According to Heidegger,

As soon as I go back up there ... I am simply transported into [my] work's own rhythm ... People in the city often wonder whether one gets lonely

2 In 1946, Heidegger worked, with a native speaker of Chinese, on a translation—never completed and now lost—of the *Dao de jing*. The "native speaker of Chinese" is said to be Xiao Shiyi who studied Western philosophy in Wiener by then.

up in the mountains ... But it isn't loneliness, it is solitude ... Solitude has the peculiar and original power of ... projecting our whole existence into the vast nearness of the presence of things. (Cooper 2012, 64–65)

What is noteworthy in Heidegger's personal experience is that it is multifaceted as regards its underlying implications. In my understanding, he feels very much at home up there in the natural surroundings that are conducive to his agreeable sense of homeliness. He seems to perceive the landscape from an ontological viewpoint. The landscape as such appears to provide solitude so as to meet his spiritual needs, enrich his own aesthetic experience, evoke his philosophical inspiration, assist him with his productive output, and above all, commune with his whole existence. Made up of the mountains, trees and lakes altogether, the landscape in Heidegger's favourite spot provides solitude, as it is above the hectic, urban world, but still dynamic as it changes through the cycle of the four seasons. Moreover, "the mountains" in this context strike me as a reminder of the Chinese notion of *shan shui* qua natural landscapes.

As seen in Chinese cultural tradition and the phrase itself, the notion as such is literally a synthesis of mountains and waters. These two types of natural entities are inseparable insofar as the structure of scenic beauty is concerned. Mountains would look as though they were dead without waters flowing through them, while they come to live with streams, rivers, waterfalls and lakes. For they tend to mirror each other and make an organic compound in certain aspects of the beautiful in nature. Being aesthetically engaging, mountains turn into mountainscapes and waters into waterscapes in accord with their specific context and atmosphere. Even though they are interactive and complementary from the perspective of natural landscapes, they can be approached and appreciated for two main reasons: in some scenic spots waterscapes are more engaging than mountainscapes, and in some other attractions, mountainscapes are more inviting than waterscapes. This distinction does not violate the fact that both of them demonstrate distinctive traits, symbolism, and aesthetic values. Nor does it take into account the preference of those who come to contemplate them for aesthetic pleasure.

As regards the well metaphor from Heidegger, it implies the mysterious source of water in view of the Way or Dao for the myriad things. One assumes that all this creates an engaging atmosphere that helps the German philosopher attain his working rhythm, become engrossed in pleasant solitude, and get into the union of his "whole existence" with "the presence of things". In short, it facilitates "the vast nearness" of natural beauty to his living *Dasein*, contemplative life, immersive expounding, aesthetic ecstasy, and philosophical inspiration, so to speak.

In addition, Heidegger's conjecturing of the well as "the great hidden stream" occurs to me as being suggestive of the Daoist worship of the "water allegory" allied with "the supreme good". More specifically, it is Laozi, the founder of early Daoism, who likens "the supreme good" to the nature of water *per se*. Generally speaking in terms of modern perception, water is claimed to have three forms—solid, liquid and gaseous. Judging from a positive viewpoint proper, we find water becomes solid when frozen in cold winter. It can be as hard as rock and used for skating, sculpture and other practical purposes. For example, it can be cut into ice blocks of varied size, stored, and utilized in summer. Moreover, water in liquid form flows through valleys into lakes, rivers and seas. As it facilitates the growth of the myriad things, it provides such advantages as agricultural irrigation, fishery, shipping and other transportation services. Moreover, water changes into gaseous form under certain weather conditions. It thus evaporates into the air and gives us the moist climate we need. However, what is meant by "the supreme good" is the most fundamental of all goods with which water is bestowed in Laozi's consideration. This point is to be further formulated later when looking into the "water allegory" in early Daoism.

Apart from Daoism, the well metaphor on this account needs to be explicated with reference to the Confucian appreciation of the "huge waterscapes" on the one hand, and on the other, to be reflected in light of the waterscape symbolism in morality. It is actually owing to the Daoist and Confucian influence that the contemplation of waterscapes remains intriguingly meaningful, and runs through many philosophic analogies, poetic compositions, landscape paintings, literati gardens, music creations, and literary theories, among other forms. It therefore gives rise to varied types of imagery and value in these domains. All this elicits a more detailed consideration of waterscapes in traditional Chinese philosophy and poetry alike. Such consideration is to be mostly conducted from aesthetic and moral perspectives. However, what is to be articulated below does not necessarily mean what is signified in Heidegger's inferences from the well metaphor, even though his interesting observation in this regard is employed as an eye-catching reminder of the water allegory and the waterscape aesthetic in focus.

Conventionally, waterscapes as aesthetic objects have been highly appreciated across China from antiquity onward, sensuously involving and intellectually inspiring to Chinese thinkers, poets and painters altogether. Their distinctive values not only appeal to aesthetic contemplation, but also stimulate philosophical reflection due to their heuristic and symbolic significance. These dimensions can be found at least in three leading spheres: the philosophical implication of the water allegory in Daoism, the moral symbolism of the river image in Confucianism, and the aesthetic significance of picturesque waterscapes in landscape poetry. Since

landscape poetry is often identified with landscape painting in both theory and praxis, the focus is therefore retained on the former instead of the latter in this discussion from an aesthetic standpoint. Moreover, such poetry is characterized by rich images and philosophic implications as it appeals to both poetic and philosophic reflections. It is in a way conceived as the expression of “the ultimate good sense” as it enjoys a wide range of readership in China and elsewhere.

The Water Allegory

Daoism is renowned for distinguishing between such binary categories as the Yin and Yang, soft and hard, weak and strong, and inactive and active, among many others. It treats them as opposite forces or aspects that co-exist, interact, and interchange within the myriad things between Heaven and Earth. However, it is inclined to pay more attention to the potential power of the Yin, the soft, the weak and the inactive rather than their opposites in order to demonstrate the dialectical mode of thinking and functioning. It has kept this tendency ever since Laozi, the founder of early Daoism.

As read in Laozi, the soft is, for instance, often allegorized to a water image because of its special character that denotes something more than its surface. What is noteworthy is the water allegory below:

The supreme good is like water.
Water is good at benefiting all things
And yet it does not compete with them.
It dwells in places that people detest,
And hence it is so close to the Dao. (Laozi 2011, 143)

Water is hereby analogized to “the supreme good” because it pertains to such merits as altruism, selflessness, modesty, receptiveness, powerfulness and so forth. As the argument reveals, these merits underlie the positive features of water itself. More specifically in the context given, water is first and foremost altruistic by nature, benefiting all things in growth without asking for anything in return, and thus corresponding to the Dao of Heaven; secondly, water is selfless in principle, serving all things but never competing with them, and thus corresponding to the Dao of the sage who works for the advantage of others but never competes with them for fame or reputation; thirdly, water appears modest, always flowing down to and dwelling in the low or humble places, and thus corresponding to the Dao of natural spontaneity that retains the origin of all things; fourthly, water joins huge rivers and merges

into vast oceans that stay open to all resources from the entire world. These oceans bear the great virtue of boundless inclusiveness, thus corresponding to the Dao of unlimited receptiveness and ready to accommodate whatever comes. Overall, water appears as though it is gentle rather than strong, but remains potentially powerful when becoming dynamic under certain circumstances, thus able to overcome all sorts of obstacles or blockages. It is therefore very similar to the nature of the Dao, which is claimed to be invisible in form but invincible in essence.

Along this line of thought, there arises a historically prevailing insight into the symbolic virtue of water. It is found inscribed on a big stone built into a bulletin wall in Lijiang, an ancient town in Yunnan province. It proclaims,

The wise are like water, for the water benefits all things without contending with others; it flows shallow around stones and thus forms a stream; it stays on in a lower pit and thus forms a pool; it stumbles down with natural circumstances and thus forms a cataract; it moves into a great valley and thus forms a broad sea. It varies in shape but retains its same nature wherever it appears. That is to say, it has few desires and wants such that it changes itself in accord with the situations involved and enjoys its freedom of movement with no obstacles in its way.

This inscription has been there for centuries as a form of moral teaching and intellectual guidance. It has been read and reconsidered repeatedly by local residents, passers-by and tourists from all over China and the rest of the world. On the account of this historical duration, it is considered to be a kind of living wisdom passed on from generation to generation, if not sanctified as something sacred from the ancients. It is at any rate an embodiment of pragmatic wisdom related to Daoism as a lifestyle. For it is not confined to the ivory tower of pedantic scholars, but transmitted to the grass roots of the common people.

Now let us turn to the water analogy again. Elsewhere Laozi goes on to advocate more explicitly a heuristic message derived from water through such a eulogistic statement:

Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water,
But no force can compare with it in attacking the hard and the strong.
For this reason there is no substitute for it.
Everyone in the world knows
that the soft can overcome the hard,
and the weak can overcome the strong,
but none can put it into practice. (Laozi 2011, 172)

Ostensibly, the water image is transfigured into something incomparable and unconquerable even though it seems softer and weaker than anything else. It is so unique and irreplaceable as a result of its twofold character: it helps things grow and flourish by virtue of its vital function on the one hand, and conquers all by means of its hidden power on the other. All this turns out to be an evident justification of its being “close to the Dao”, as Laozi states.

According to his empirical intuition, Laozi infers from the natural phenomenon of flowing water such external traits as softness, weakness and humbleness. However, these traits are conducive to gains instead of losses since they are able to bring down whatever water meets with. In other words, being a symbol of the soft and the weak, water has such potential power that it can easily defeat the hard and the strong. And this power is largely determined by the perseverance of hydrodynamics itself. Viewing the text as a whole, we can most likely conclude that Laozi’s depiction of water in terms of its function reflects his philosophy of “sticking to the soft and the tender”, and accords with his dialectic principle that “weakness is the function of the Dao”. To illustrate the great potential of water, we can turn to an old Chinese saying—“A drop of water can make a whole through a rock”.³ Naturally, this “drop of water” is one of countless and successive drops. It signifies a kind of continuation performed by virtue of unyielding endeavour and consistent perseverance.

As a matter of fact, Laozi himself appreciates the wisdom and power exemplified by the hidden virtues of water, and intends to apply them to personal cultivation in general and to political leadership in particular. To his mind, the best personality is expected to learn from the aforementioned qualities of water. For in reality, only those who are modest and selfless are most able to enjoy companionship or friendship from others. Likewise, only those who take up what others find too insignificant, unpleasant or difficult to do are most likely to succeed in their careers. This is also true of those leaders who are able to establish themselves and then keep their good positions, providing they manage to avoid being arrogant, dominant or autocratic with peers and subordinates alike. Hence Laozi advises people, and especially leaders, to draw wisdom and virtue from what is seemingly humble, soft and weak, like water. As he states: “In dwelling, [the best man] loves where it is low. In the mind, he loves what is profound. In dealing with others, he loves sincerity. In speaking, he loves faithfulness. In governing, he loves order. In handling affairs, he loves competence. In his activities, he loves timeliness. Since he does not compete, He is free from any fault” (Laozi 2011, 143–44).

It is also noteworthy that Sunzi, a contemporary of Laozi, also makes use of the water allegory in *The Art of War* (孙子兵法). As he writes:

3 The old saying in Chinese is *dī shuǐ chuān shí* (滴水穿石).

The laws of military operations are like waters; the tendency of waters is to flow from heights to lowlands. The law of successful operations is to avoid the enemy's strength and strike his weakness. Waters changes its course in accordance with the contours of the land. The soldier works out his victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy. Hence, just as the flowing of waters retains no constant shape, so in war there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in accordance with the enemy situation and thereby succeeds in winning may be said to be divine. (Sunzi 1993, 41–42)

Obviously, Sunzi recommends a close observation on the dynamic features of water. For the key substance of the art of war emphasizes the strategy of adaptability based on in-depth knowledge of the two sides engaged in a battle. This is not only strength-wise, but also scheme-wise. For any military operation is as situational as the flowing waters, nothing therein is constant but instead forever changing. If a commander sticks to a campaign scheme rigidly and develops no alternatives to deal with unforeseen issues, then he is prone to be trapped and defeated. Interestingly, Sunzi is not war-like at all in spite of being a historically famous strategist and war theorist. Instead, he is highly aware of the fatal destructiveness of warfare, and thus keeps warning the state leadership not to launch any military actions unless there is no other choice. Moreover, he holds that the best stratagem is to undermine the offensive conspiracy of one's rivals and succeed in scaring them away without direct confrontation on the battlefield.

The Moral Symbolism

The Confucian appreciation of waterscapes results in a kind of moral symbolism in essence. A waterscape is aesthetically engaging. Moreover, it is heuristically appealing because it gives much food for thought. According to the morality-based tradition, it is philosophically provocative and morally symbolic in kind. Confucius himself takes the lead in having a moral reflection on the flowing current in a big river. As recorded in some classical texts, the method of appreciating waterscapes initially stemmed from his affirmation, as follows:

The wise are delighted in waters while the humane in mountains. The wise are active while the humane tranquil. The wise are feeling constantly joyful while the humane enjoying longevity. (Confucius 1995 [1979], 6.23)

Herein “waters” refer to a running river or swift current, and “mountains” to a huge ridge and high peak. They are distinguished in terms of their respective features or physical virtues. The former is flowing and active in kind, transparent when shallow while unfathomable when deep, looking as if it is quick, witty, sensitive, observant and progressing all the time. The latter stays still and quiet by nature, ready to accommodate the myriad things and provide them with what facilitates their growth, appearing as though it is firm, stable, reliable, consistent and benevolent in any case. Likewise, the distinction between the wise and the humane is made according to their respective characteristics and personalities. In comparison, the wise somewhat correspond to the physical virtues of waters, whereas the humane correspond to the physical virtues of mountains. The wise are inclined to feel delighted with the symbolism of the river image because they are intelligent and quick-witted, acting like the swift currents when perceiving things and handling any problems they encounter. Moreover, they tend to find joy instead of confusion because they are able to attain the most insightful understanding and knowledge of what human life means and where it proceeds. With respect to the humane, they are saturated with the consciousness of reciprocal love and kindness for other beings. They seem to go beyond such social bondages as fame and profit. They remain therefore peaceful and tranquil to the extent that nothing can disturb or distract them at all. They are well positioned to experience “the timeless time” that is metaphorically identified with longevity and eternity. At this stage, both the wise and humane have returned to nature as a consequence of having succeeded in freeing themselves from social alienation. This state of being is not only psychological, but also physical. It is actually the outcome of “naturalized humanity” (人自然化) (Li 1998, 161–62).

There is an extended comment on the wise delighting in waters that appears in the *Shuo Yuan* (说苑) by Liu Xiang (刘向 77–6 BC). It is summarized as follows:

The reason why the wise are delighted in waters lies in these features: Waters originated from streams flow continuously day and night as though they are full of dynamic power; they follow natural courses, run through all the small gaps, and make them equal to the same level; they move into the lower places as though they demonstrate the modest virtue of propriety; they never hesitate to meet with the deep valleys as though they are filled with incredible courage; they enter into the ponds or lakes when turbid but come out of them clean as though they bear the virtue of transformation. Many people learn from this virtue so as to become righteous, and the myriad things attain it so as to keep alive. When assembled in valleys and seas, waters are so profound that they appear as

fathomless as the sage of divinity. Hence the wise get delighted in waters that moisten and nurture all beings between Heaven and Earth apart from their capacity of helping the state and family accomplish and develop. (Liu 2019, Ch.17)

Along this line of thought, the Confucian attitude towards the contemplation of waterscapes is further extended when Zigong asks his master, Confucius, why he has to observe them when meeting each big river. He replies:

As regards the water flow of a torrential river, it is in a way like virtue (de) because it benefits all beings without a deliberate purpose for itself; it is in a way like righteousness (yi) because it flows into low places according to the natural courses; it is in a way like fundamental principle (dao) because it runs ceaselessly forward; it is in a way like courage (yong) because it is resolute and fearless while cutting through deep valleys; it is in a way like justice (fa) because it keeps the same water level when it fills into low pits; it is in a way like uprightness (zheng) because it spills over any container without being coerced when it is full; it is in a way like sensibility (cha) because it is soft and reaches the minute wherever it goes; it is in a way like moral transformation (shan hua) because all things that grow out of water are fresh and clean; it is in a way like volition (zhi) because it zigzags here and there but continues eastward with unshakable determination. It is due to all this above that a superior man finds it necessary to gaze at the water flow encountered each time. (Xun 1995, 593)

This passage is further extended elsewhere with some modifications in accord with the moral values highly recommended in Confucianism. It reads:

A superior man compares the water flow of a torrential river to moral qualities. For instance, the water flow is in a way like a kind of virtue (de) as it benefits all things selflessly; it is in a way like a kind of benevolence (ren) as it brings about life wherever it goes; it is in a way like a kind of righteousness (yi) as it flows to low places according to its natural principle; it is in a way like a kind of wisdom (zhi) as it moves observably when shallow but cannot be fathomed when profound; it is in a way like a kind of courage (yong) as it never hesitates and fears to cut through deep valleys; it is in a way like a kind of observance (cha) as it appears soft but nourishes all things; it is in a way like a kind of uprightness (zheng) as it accepts all sources and never rejects the polluted; it is in a way like

a kind of moral transformation (*shan hua*) as it receives unclear water but produces clear water; it is in a way like a kind of justice (*zheng*) as it holds its equilibrium even in its container; it is in a way like a kind of measure (*du*) as it spills out when it is full; it is in a way like a kind of persistent volition (*yi*) as it zigzags its way towards the east. Therefore, a superior man finds it worthy to contemplate it. (Liu 1992, Ch. 17.47)

Judging from the analogical characterization given above, what is noticeable is an evident correspondence between the natural phenomena and moral symbolism. It is assumed that human nature as a result of being human as human is fostered and shaped by human culture, but it preserves some resemblance to how it originated from the natural world. This is due to people's observing and imitating what has been happening in their surroundings. In other words, when finding out what is going on in the natural world, humans would be aesthetically stimulated, intellectually provoked and morally enlightened one way or another. This is noticeable in the Confucian delight from contemplating waters and mountains. Such being the case, Qian Mu (钱穆 1895–1990) makes a remark from a moral and artistic viewpoint. He assumes that human morality is rooted in human nature, and that human nature stems from the natural world. The beautiful in the natural world is perceived and rethought through the human mind. The beautiful as such is transformed into art when expressed by relevant media. Therefore, the morally virtuous tend to know and enjoy art more than others. All this is in line with the natural world, because the ancient thinkers in China would equate the oneness between Heaven and humans with the oneness between goodness and beauty (Li 1998, 161).

There are at least four points to make with regard to the moral symbolism of the river image. First and foremost, the delight drawn from waters and mountains is not simply an aesthetic reaction to the sensuous aspects, but also a spiritual feeling of the moral import. It reveals a vicarious experience of the natural beauty in landscapes that is parallel to a moral assessment. Secondly, the Confucian stance towards both waters and mountains manifests a special kind of affinity with nature, which is further developed into the conscious oneness between nature and human-kind. It is then incorporated into the Chinese way of contemplating the beautiful both aesthetically and spiritually. Thirdly, it is peculiar to the landscapes across China that contain rich cultural elements and historical traces, comprising an important part of Chinese aesthetic phenomenology and art creation, poetry and painting, in particular. Fourthly, the way of appreciating the beautiful in landscapes involves a hierarchy of value judgment in light of three different attitudes. According to Confucius, "Those who know it are no better than those who like it; those who like it are no better than those who are delighted in it" (Confucius 1995, 6.20).

Why is this so? Those who know it just as it is do not feel as strongly as those who like it. However, those who like it are simply fond of it but have not yet got a full appreciation of it. In other words, they are unable to put it into real practice in a joyful manner. As for those who are delighted in it, they are those who both know it and like it, and in addition, they have mastered it and thereby take pleasure from it in effect. In contrast to those who know it and those who like it, those who are delighted in it stand out as they are able to appreciate it with aesthetic sensibility and experience the free state of being in an ontological sense. For they enjoy the spiritual freedom that comes with such an enjoyable engagement, and go so far as to live an artistic life in essence.

Talking about the beautiful in nature, we can find much evidence from the picturesque imagery of landscape poetry in particular. Poetry of this kind holds a most important position in Chinese art and literature. Its richness and attractiveness demonstrate not only the magic power of words and the aesthetic wisdom of ancient times, but also the tremendous beauty of natural scenery. As detected in the Chinese literary legacy, the general output of the poets in the Tang and the Song dynasties contributes a great deal to the development of picturesque waterscapes through philosophical reflection and poetic creativity. As a result, the value of waterscape aesthetics in particular has been promoted and disseminated far and wide ever since, due to “the ultimate good sense” they express. It is generally the case that the aesthetic significance of the picturesque waterscapes boasts such four cardinal features as being verbally expressive, visually evocative, thought-provoking, and able to impact one’s mood. It is poetically represented in differing modes that can be displayed by at least three broad categories, including the beautiful, the majestic, and the musical.

The Beautiful Waterscape

In accord with their aesthetic properties, the beautiful waterscape (秀美型水景) is thus conducive to the harmonious interaction and joyful convergence between the subject and object. It is therefore seen in a tranquil stream, a transparent pond, and an attractive river in particular. In actuality, waterscapes appear as the main scenes of poetic descriptions due to their visual appeal and suggestive significance.

First and foremost, as regards the tranquil stream, typical examples can easily be drawn from Chinese poetry ever since the Tang dynasty. For instance, we can perceive it first in a poem by Wang Wei and then in another piece by Su Shi,

Fresh rain has fallen on the vacant mountains;
 When autumn's evening approaches.
 The bright moon is shining through the pines,
 The clear stream flowing over the stones.
 Bamboos rustle, as washing maids return.
 Lotuses stir, a fishing boat descends. (Zhang and Bruce 2008, 37)⁴

As noticed in the above description, the waterscape is associated with the “fresh rain”, “clear stream”, “washing maids” and “fishing boat”, all of which are soaked in “the bright moon” and rounded out by the “pines”, “stones”, “bamboos” and “lotuses”. The tranquillity is indicated by the “vacant mountains”, which are devoid of any other intruders and noises. What could be heard are the sounds of water flowing over the stones in contrast to the rustling of bamboos and a row boat. The depiction invents a verbal painting that pleases the sight, hearing, mind and spirit altogether.

By Sandy River pond the new-lit lamps are bright.
 Who sings “the Water of Melody” at night?
 When I come back, the wind goes down, the bright moon paves
 With emerald glass the river waves. (Xu 2008, 121)⁵

What is noteworthy in the stanza given above is the image of the pond in particular. It is similarly placed against the background of the “bright moon”. The water surface serves as a mirror as if it is like “emerald glass”. The song fitting the tune of “the Water of Melody” is accompanied by the rhythmic ups and downs of the “river waves”. They interact to produce a symphonic effect. The entire setting strikes out the quietude “at night” in the moonlight. It is not only agreeable to the eyes, but also delightful to the ears of anyone present.

Next, let us turn to the prominent scene of a small pond. It is portrayed by Liu Zongyuan in one of his poetic travelogues, which reads:

Walking westward 120 feet from the small hill, I heard water sounds
 behind a bamboo grove. The sounds were similar to those of the jade
 ornament on the body in ancient times. I was feeling so delighted that
 I made a short cut through the grove. Right there I found a small pond,

4 This poem by Wang Wei (王维) is originally titled 山居秋暝 (*My Mountain Villa in an Autumn Evening*).

5 This *ci* poem by Su Shi (苏轼) is called 虞美人: 有美堂赠述古 (*Tune: The Beautiful Lady Yu—Written for Chen Xiang at the Scenic Hall*).

and saw its bottom rock through the clear and cool water ... Down in the pond were nearly a hundred of little fish swimming about so freely. The sunlight shot through the pond and projected the shadows of the fish over the bottom rock. The fish seemed too happy to make a move. All of a sudden, they dashed afar and near, back and forth, as if they were playing joyfully with me as an onlooker. (Ni 2000, 111)⁶

The pond is situated in a place undisturbed by any others. Its water is transparent to the extent that one can see through it to its bottom rock. Reflected there are the shadows of some little fish remaining at rest for the moment. Sure enough, the transparency is conditioned by the clearness of the water and the isolation of the location. It thus makes the tiny creatures feel as if they are free, happy and safe when enjoying their leisure time. Then, at this moment, a human visitor comes along as a seeming intruder, disturbing them a bit and causing momentary confusion. But very soon they resume their peace, and commence to play joyfully with the visitor when they seem to find him contemplating their lifestyle with good will and appreciation, if not curiosity.

In line with the above-cited extract is a poem with the title of *The Rear Buddha Hall of the Broken Hill Temple* (题破山寺后禅院) by Chang Jian (常建 fl. 749). It reveals some similar substance and ambiance (Zhang and Bruce 2008, 135). Once again we see a water pond situated in “mountain scenes”. Over it are the singing birds, and away from it is a temple sending off “the sounding bell and chime”. In “the heart of silence”, the “images in the pond” are perceived as a result of the crystal-clear water. These images may be composed of the overhead plants, passing clouds, and even the contemplative visitor. They therefore serve to “empty the human mind” by purifying it of secular cares and worries altogether. This in fact reveals the main reason why the visitor goes into the deep mountains and gazes at the pond in solitude. What he does is something more than a simple trip for aesthetic satisfaction. It can be considered as a spiritual quest for mental purification in this case. Chinese literati are very often said to take up this habitual action in search of spiritual freedom and mental tranquillity.

Next, let us look into the essential aspects of an attracting riverscape, as illustrated by three exemplary poems by different poets who happened to live at adjacent periods in the Tang dynasty. The first piece is the *Spring, the River, Flowers, the Moony Night* (春江花月夜) by Zhang Ruoxu (张若虚 c. 670–c. 730) (Zhang and Bruce 2008, 17). As detected in its outset, the river becomes so widened and blurred at night that its surface appears sea-like, with its visual

6 It is quoted from a short travelogue of 至小丘西小石潭记 (*The Little Stone Pond at the Westside of the Hill*) by Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元).

space extending far in the springtime. What actually surrounds it encompasses the dynamic waves mingled with fragrant flowers and so forth under glistening moonlight. It thus brings out not only a beautiful scene that is perfused with aesthetic temptation, but also spurs a vicarious response on the part of those who contemplate it obsessively. Perceptually through imagination, it turns out to please such senses as sight, hearing, smell and even taste on the account of its diverse imagery, up-and-down movement and blooming flowers, quite apart from the other elements involved. The second example is the *Song of Green Water* (绿水曲) by Li Bai (李白) (Xu 2007, 43). As observed in his picturesque depiction, the green water and the autumn moon are set out in a phenomenal contrast. The white lilies in the lake are reflecting the moonlight. The lotus flowers are blooming and shining in fresh red, turning out to be more attractive than the fair cheek of the bashful oarswomen. All this contributes to the magic spell of the riverscape as such. Finally, the third sample is the *Bamboo Branch Song* (竹枝歌) by Liu Yuxi (刘禹锡 772–842) (Xu 2008, 25). As read in the alluring setting saturated with poetic charm, the red mountain cloaked in peach blossoms appears as the background of “the shore washed by spring water below”. Even though the poet gets emotionally drunk and infatuated in a sensuous ambiance, he wakes up with a profound enlightenment in a philosophical sense. That is, the red blossoms are passionate and engaging indeed, but they are short-lived and not permanent at all, because they are bound to fade away like a romantic fantasy of loving pathos. With this pessimistic state of mind, he likens the river to his sorrow that flows on forever. The shift of the sentimental tone herein seems to be a bit sad, but it tells of the fact that it is deep-rooted in human consciousness and existence. Moreover, it discloses, from past to present, the psychology of Chinese literati who in reality are often confronted with more socio-political pressure and suppression.

The Majestic Waterscape

In comparison with its beautiful counterpart, the majestic waterscape (壮美型水景) becomes what it is owing to its dynamic, amazing and even awesome properties, including rapidness, powerfulness, greatness, vastness and so forth, all of which seem to resemble some key features of the sublime in nature. In most cases, the majestic waterscape will likely lead to opposing interaction and even conflictive tension between the subject and the object. As a rule, it is exemplified in the overwhelmingly rapid torrents, powerful waterfalls, great waves, vast lakes and the like.

In most cases, the experience of the majestic waterscape can be greatly intensified when obtained through a traditional form of sightseeing, such as by avoiding modern transportation. This is simply because the poets who described these scenes gained access to them in such traditional ways as hiking, or on a boat or horse. They would have felt something rather different if they had arrived by car or helicopter.

Firstly, let us review what Li Bai experienced on an old-fashioned boat along the Yangtze River.

Leaving at dawn the White Emperor crowned with cloud,
I've sailed a thousand miles through Three Gorges in a day.
With monkeys' sad adieux the riverbanks are loud,
my skiff has left then thousand mountains far away. (Xu 2007, 195)⁷

The rapid torrents are not directly mentioned in the poem. However, they are implied by the fast speed that carries the person aboard “a thousand miles” away from White Emperor Town down to Jiangling City. The distance between the two places is actually a hundred miles or so, but is exaggerated to strengthen the sensational experience of this unusual journey by boat. A skiff winding through the Three Gorges is always an adventure, both in the past and at present. It requires morals rather than courage to face its tremendous risk. Furthermore, the atmosphere in the poem is immensely magnified by means of the fragile skiff moving along the swift river, and the sad adieux of the monkeys amidst the high mountains over the riverbanks. It is breath-taking and heart-stirring, not merely for the traveller inside the scene, but also for the onlooker outside it.

Secondly, the majestic qualities are often manifested by powerful waterfalls in particular. Across the world there are a number of cataracts—very large waterfalls renowned for their overwhelming volume, threatening appearance and sublime waterscapes. They have thus developed into international tourist attractions. The creative representation of waterfalls plays a crucial role in some classical Chinese poetry, even though such scenes are uncommon. Notwithstanding this, we find the most familiar and outstanding image of all in *The Waterfall in Mount Lu Viewed from Afar* (望庐山瀑布) by Li Bai. It runs as follows:

The sunlit Censer Peak exhales incense-like cloud;
The cataract hangs like an upended river, sounding loud.
Its torrent dashes down three thousand feet from high,
as if the Silver River fell from azure sky. (Xu 2007, 15)

7 It is under the Chinese title of 早发白帝城 (*Leaving the White Emperor Town for Jiang Ling*).

Geographically speaking, the Censor Peak is one of the summits amid the range of Mount Lushan in modern Jiangxi Province. According to the allegorical depiction, it is wrapped in sunlight while giving off purple clouds as though it were a huge incense-burner. Flowing down from its top is a gigantic cataract with a huge volume of water. It is hanging there “like an upended river” “sounding loud” enough to be heard miles afar. More amazingly, its unexpected length plunges down to the bottom of a deep valley, appearing as though the Silver River, a typical Chinese analogy for the Milky Way, was falling “from azure sky”. The hyperbolic rhetoric of the image stems from a unique imagination. Such features as the unusual height, volume, length, loudness and power of the waterfall are vividly synthesized to reveal what a majestic waterscape it is. More often than not, the poetic description cannot be identified with the real scene it claims to describe. For the poet tends to make an idiosyncratic judgment or comparison according to their personal experience and productive imagination. However, he still draws his inspiration one way or another from what he actually sees and feels.

Thirdly, certain traits of a majestic waterscape are reflected in the great waves or tides that occur with big rivers or vast seas. Many poets and painters alike are attracted to contemplate and portray them in their works, as in the following three examples, all of which are linked with the Yangtze River proper. The first sample is Li Bai’s *Farewell Beyond the Thorn-Gate Gorge* (渡荆门送别) (Xu 2007, 13). Herein the poet jots down his experience traveling along the river from Sichuan to Hubei. As he zigzags his way out through the narrow mountain valleys into the wide plain area, he is feeling at ease after taking a deep breath, so excited to observe the great waves rolling “to boundless main”. Right there he draws tremendous joy from the majestic waterscape, such that he claims the great river flowing from his hometown will escort him faithfully and in a friendly manner, wherever his boat is carried onward.

The second example is drawn from the *Watching the Tidal Bore* (望海潮) by Liu Yong (柳永 c. 984–c. 1053) (Xu 2008, 79). He is renowned for his *ci* poems about personal sentiment, sorrow and romance, but here he produces a very memorable image of a majestic riverscape that is quite rare in his literary output. Under his pen the “cloud-crowned trees” upon the riverbanks appear as huge umbrellas, down below are the great waves rolling up like snow, and pouring over the riversides in white foam. At the same time the waves are making a great noise that is not mentioned here, but can be heard from afar. The torrent runs faster as it is sped up by the pushing waves. The person in the poem is amazed at the scene, until it disappears from sight in the remote east.

The third example is the *Ode to Chibi with Nostalgia* (赤壁怀古) by Su Shi (苏轼 1037–1101) (Xu 2008, 149). It was presented in the form of a *ci* poem as well,

due to the popularity of this form during his era. Like Liu Yong, Su compares the swashing waves to “a thousand heaps of snow” as a result of their whiteness. But distinctly and clearly, he rounds out the great waves in sharp contrast to the “jagged rocks” instead of “cloud-crowned trees”. Right on the spot, huge waves are striking against hard rocks. The sounds burst out so loud, transmitting far and wide. They work together to render the waterscape even more majestic or magnificent. Accordingly, “many heroes” and their heroic deeds are embedded into the scene. They remind the reader of the very site where a historic battle once took place during the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280). It was decisive with regard to the destiny of the whole country and its course of development over half a century. In the poem it is used as a foil to set out the natural power of the majestic waterscape. In return, this natural power helps to magnify the importance of the historical event.

Fourthly, what is sublimely majestic is represented by a lake some 800 square miles in size. It is largely aligned with a vast, broad, and seemingly boundless surface that extends beyond the visual threshold of man. It can be well illustrated with two famous poems. One is Du Fu’s *Climbing the Yueyang Tower* (登岳阳楼) (Zhang and Bruce 2008, 111), and the other is Meng Haoran’s *Watching Dongting Lake*.⁸ According to Du’s perception, the size of Dongting Lake stretches far and wide to cover “two states in the southeast” of China: one is known as the State of Wu situated in the modern province of Jiangsu, and the other the State of Chu situated in the modern province of Hubei. However, it is not mentioned (for obvious reasons) that the central part of the lake is in the modern province of Hunan. The lake’s extraordinary vastness goes beyond the ultimate stretch of human vision or sense of sight. In addition, its broad surface reflects “the universe of sun and moon” as though it is blended with infinite space, in which the sun, moon and lake are mirroring one another. This being the case, it gives rise to two interrelated images: one is above in the sky while the other is below in the lake. Nowadays Dongting Lake still remains vast, although its surface has shrunk a lot because of the lack of water and the construction of an enormous reservoir in the upper region of the Yangtze River.

As portrayed by Meng’s pen, the boundless vision of Dongting Lake is emphasized again in an even more startling image. It is hyperbolized to the degree that it can “meet the sky blue” when it reaches the highest water level. It is hot and sunny in the

8 Meng Haoran, *Watching Dongting Lake* (临洞庭上张丞相). “In August Dongting Lake is full,/So boundless to meet the sky blue./Its vapours rising over the Cloud-Dream swamp,/And its huge waves shaking the Yueyang town.” The English translation is mine.

month of August, as mentioned in the poem. The water inside the lake warms up and evaporates into the rising air. This being true, Yueyang Town appears to be enveloped in a kind of steaming mist. A strange and mysterious sight, the mist moves back and forth with the huge waves across the lake. All this creates a majestic spectacle, and tempts traveller's to climb up the Yueyang Tower so as to watch and listen to it.

The Musical Waterscape

The musical waterscape (乐感型水景) is characteristically based on the intriguing power of water music that comes into effect in varied forms and volumes. It is not simply heard in the dynamic waterfalls, but also enjoyed in the murmuring creeks and bubbling springs in tranquillity. It is mysteriously alluring to the extent that some travellers in Chinese history prefer water music to instrumental music on certain occasions, and this is especially the case with the Gong'an Group (公安派) in the Ming dynasty.

Being a leading member of the group, Yuan Zhongdao distinguishes himself from the others with his persistent indulgence in water music. He even goes so far as to assert that water music is more distinctive and delicate than stringed music. For he believes that water music is natural and pure, whereas stringed music is artificial and pretentious. On some occasions, he likens a wise mind with flowing water that changes both subtly and variably. On other occasions, he listens to the interactions between stones and water in a stream, and finds water sounds corresponding to what is produced either by the stringed instruments known as the *qin* (琴) and *se* (瑟) or by vocal singing with emotional expression (Yuan 1981, 171). What follows is one of his detailed descriptions of water music in a fascinating travelogue,

The Jade Spring Water splashes pearls of drops around at the outset, flowing down into a channel for a while, and then stumbling over a large rock in the middle all of a sudden, thus producing great sounds that can be heard from afar. I often come here and enjoy listening to it. There are stones by its sides, I put some cattail leaves over one of them, and sit on them listening from morning till night. Initially I am driven about by my impulsive mentality and rampant ideas. Consequently, my sense of hearing prevents an attentive and in-depth listening to the stream. For it is easily disturbed by the rustling wind in the forest and the singing birds in the valley. When dark falls and quietude comes, I stop watching and return to listening, I thereby feel the varied changes of the water sounds since I have regained my attention and tranquillity by cutting off all other connections. At this moment, I find the water sounding so

musical, sometimes like swinging pines and clicking jade, sometimes like playing the stringed instruments of different types, sometimes like cracking thunders across the sky, sometimes like powerful torrent dashing through mountains. The more serene my mind becomes, the louder the stream sounds. Its melody is heard by my ear, but pours into my heart and mind. Even though it appears desolate and cool, it serves to purify my lungs and soul, rid me off secular dust, make me forget my past, and keep me beyond life and death. In turn, as the stream sounds louder, my mind becomes more serene. (Yuan 1981, 170)⁹

It can be seen that the water music that comes to the listener in this passage is not simply a matter of sight and sound, but also aesthetic and spiritual. It thus encourages the attentive listener to sit in forgetfulness and enjoy supreme happiness. The listener then listens carefully to the water sounds changing according to his extended imagination and association, but he also feels himself enter the water melody. He is thus encouraged to go beyond his self and even his conception of life and death in a delightful experience of absolute freedom. All this embodies his profound understanding of the naturalistic wisdom of Daoism. He therefore applies it to his way of life by identifying his being with the natural beauty in the water sounds. Beauty of this kind can superficially be seen as the creation of the water sounds, but it is in essence the outcome of musicalizing the cosmic rhythm in the traditional Chinese consciousness of space and life. The act of musicalizing as such is not confined to the water sounds alone. It is exercised extensively in the arts of harmonics, calligraphy, poetry and painting. On this account, the Chinese literati tend to appreciate natural beauty by infusing an ontological meaning into it. By so doing, they are able to achieve a transcendent experience of the oneness between Heaven and Man, an experience that is close to the ecstasy in a spiritual and religious sense. In order to achieve this, however, one needs personal cultivation as well as a rich imagination and high sensibility.

It seems that Yuan, as a member of the Chinese literati, enjoys a kind of ecstasy in his deep contemplation of water music. He tends to project his feelings and emotions and even himself into the aesthetic object as such. Therein he appreciates not only the melodic charm and varying sounds of the flowing stream, but also the life rhythm and mystical musicality of the universe, no matter whether heard or not. Eventually he frees himself from all cares and worries, and lives in joy, peace and even self-forgetfulness, as though he throws himself into a union with the waterscape he has encountered.

9 Thus is cited from one of the travelogues that is titled 爽簾亭記 (*Contemplation under the Cool and Tranquil Pavilion*) by Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道 1570–1623).

Conclusion

To sum up, the consideration of the water allegory and waterscape aesthetics set out above is not merely provoked by the wealth of Chinese landscape poetry, but also evoked by Heidegger's ontological interest in the hidden stream and the well metaphor. Now reconsidering this from the perspective of the Chinese thought and poetic heritage discussed above, we may arrive at a tentative conclusion that waterscapes in particular have played a significant role in human life from past to present, for they bear philosophical, moral, and aesthetic values. They can therefore be employed as aesthetic objects as they delight the sight, hearing, mind and spirit. Moreover, they can be utilized to facilitate the restoration of the sense of both Being and nostalgia *qua* homeliness, which are rediscovered in closer contact with the Earth in particular. In addition, the poetic expression of waterscapes in varied images and styles mirrors and corresponds to "the ultimate good sense" coupled with the sense of nostalgia *qua* homeliness, the sense that sheds much light on the contemplation of waterscape beauty, the development of aesthetic perception, the possibility of spiritual enlightenment, the sublimation of human living, and—above all—the nourishment of home-consciousness, among many other things.

As explained above, the Daoist support for the water allegory puts much stress on the altruistic and modest character of the flowing water that benefits all beings and things. It therefore calls for greater attention to be paid to the heuristic message of the allegory in one sense, and commends the supreme good of the water in the other. By so doing it lays down the philosophical grounds of the development of waterscape aesthetics in the Chinese tradition.

Parallel to the Daoist view, the Confucian preoccupation with vast waterscapes retains its focus on the moral symbolism of such images. Confucius himself is said to have enjoyed watching huge waterscapes, and likened the flowing river to the thought of the wise, due to the active and productive virtues of both. His personification of the running river is essentially oriented towards morality, due to its resolute and unyielding characteristics, which takes a further step towards consolidating the moral symbolism of waterscapes in particular. Its hidden impact has been passed on as part of the psychology and aesthetic awareness among Chinese literati from past to present.

With regard to the classical poems of picturesque waterscapes presented in various images, tones and styles, they are historically exemplified in demonstrating the aesthetic significance of such waterscapes, and characteristically divided into such leading categories as the beautiful, the majestic, and the musical, each of which have some relevant values, properties and effects. As for the water music,

it features varied forms and tunes in terms of changing situations and contexts. It is clearly audible when it comes to swashing waterfalls, but rather feeble when it comes to murmuring creeks and bubbling springs. Nevertheless, its aesthetic charm may tempt an attentive listener to feel himself into its rhythmic flow one way or another.

Moreover, the experience of waterscape aesthetics works chiefly in two modes: perceptual and mental. One is pleasing to both eyes and ears in an aesthetically perceptual sense, while the other to the mind and spirit in an intuitively contemplative manner. When it comes to aesthetic contemplation, the psychological reaction is initially aroused by the positive, halo effect of the scenery that attracts the attention of the viewer. During this process, there are at least two acts involved: one is aesthetic detachment, and the other is aesthetic engagement. The former pushes the viewer to free himself from cares and worries for a moment, directs his attention to the object alone. The latter advises the viewer to feel himself into the object they are contemplating. This leads the viewer to obtain an experience that could be either vicarious or empathetic. Empirically, the two acts offer an aesthetic attitude towards what is to be perceived and contemplated, thus serving as part of being among those who are inclined to hanker after the art of living in particular.

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Boundary of the Sky: Environmentalism, Daoism, and the Logic of Increase

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Abstract

There are three good reasons why Daoism is a bad candidate for addressing contemporary environmental issues. First, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* do not contain a concept of “nature” akin to ours today. Second, the philosophies of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are anything but revolutionary in spirit—and we need some revolutions. Finally, we need big changes from the top, and early Chinese thinkers did not conceive of political institutions in the way that we have them. Despite these reasons, or perhaps precisely because of them, early Daoist attitudes can provide insightful resources for reflecting on some of our most unreflected upon attitudes. In particular, the need for growth in nearly all areas of society is taken as a given, or even necessity, for our way of life. And while environmentalism and climate change are complex and tricky issues, growth has been identified by many as a common denominator when figuring out exactly what needs to change. This paper argues that if we shift our focus from seeking to find environmental concerns in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to philosophizing with these texts, then we can reflect on our environmental issues in interesting ways. To this end I will present “not contending” (不爭) “awareness of contentment” (知足), “not acting for” (無為) and “according to itself” (自然) as key Daoist attitudes which steer our thinking away from growth and along trajectories which can help human systems be better synchronized with non-human ones.

Keywords: environmentalism, climate change, Daoism, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*

Meja neba: okoljevarstvo, daoizem in logika naraščanja

Izvilleček

Obstajajo trije dobri razlogi, zakaj je daoizem slab kandidat za reševanje sodobnih okoljskih vprašanj. Prvič, *Laozi* in *Zhuangzi* ne vsebujeta koncepta »narave«, kot ga razumemo danes. Drugič, filozofiji *Laozija* in *Zhuangzija* sta vse prej kot revolucionarni po duhu – mi pa potrebujemo nekaj revolucij. Nazadnje, velike spremembe potrebujemo od zgoraj, zgodnji kitajski misleci pa si političnih institucij niso predstavljali tako, kakor so poznane nam. Kljub tem razlogom ali pa morda prav zaradi njih lahko zgodnje daoistične države zagotavljajo pronicljive vire za razmislek o nekaterih naših najbolj nereflektiranih

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držah. Zlasti potreba po rasti na skoraj vseh družbenih področjih se nam zdi samoumevna ali celo nujna za naš način življenja. In čeprav sta okoljevarstvo in podnebne spremembe kompleksni in kočljivi vprašanji, so mnogi pri ugotavljanju, kaj točno je treba spremeniti, prepoznali rast kot skupni imenovalec. V tem prispevku zagovarjamo tezo, da lahko o naših okoljskih vprašanjih razmišljamo na zanimive načine, če se preusmerimo od iskanja okoljskih vprašanj v *Laoziju* in *Zhuangziju* k filozofiranju s pomočjo teh besedil. V ta namen bom predstavil »nekonfliktnost« (不爭), »zavedanje zadovoljstva« (知足), »odsotnost delovanja« (無為) in »samo po sebi« (自然) kot ključne daoistične drže, ki usmerjajo naše razmišljanje stran od rasti in po poteh, ki lahko pomagajo človeškim sistemom k boljši usklajenosti z nečloveškimi sistemi.

Ključne besede: okoljevarstvo, podnebne spremembe, daoizem, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*

Introduction

We should begin by noting that climate change is a most, if not the most, serious issue facing today's world. Academic reflections, political discussions "blah, blah, blah". Hopefully, not so much, but perhaps. Greta Thunberg's verbal lambaste of politicians, leaders, and those who have the power to actually change things as amounting to no more than "blah, blah, blah", is worth keeping in mind. Hopefully, we are not just spinning so many wheels. Hopefully, some of our reflections have real world consequences. Graham Parkes is an excellent example of someone whose cross-cultural concern for climate change is not just so much "blah, blah, blah". His devotion to this issue is admirable, and his contribution to the current volume contains much advice for action. We should all pay attention to his words.

Nevertheless, philosophical Daoism,¹ which this special volume promises to emphasize, is a bad candidate for addressing environmentalism for at least three reasons. First, in early Chinese thought there is no concept of "nature" akin to what we common mean by this word today. This topic has been written about already, and is largely uncontroversial.² Though not completely damning, rec-

1 In the context of this article "Daoism" will refer to the received versions of the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子. For this discussion textual issues related to authorship and various versions, as well as the use of the label "Daoism" will be ignored because they are not pertinent to the arguments. As will be defined below, this paper is "tradition-focused" and emphasizes philosophical interpretations of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as they developed in the Chinese commentarial tradition. Similarly, religious Daoism will not be discussed. Truly, this tradition might have different resources and perhaps more familiar notions of nature and the environment. For more on this see Chen, Chen and Chen (2010).

2 For a detailed discussion of relevant concepts, including *ziran*, *tian*, *wanwu*, *dao* and others, see D'Ambrosio (2013). By "lack of controversy" I mean that while some people have glossed the abovementioned terms as "nature" in a contemporary sense, there is no good argument for that

ognizing that early Chinese thinkers did not view the “environment” the way we do means that our approach should be altered—and that is probably a good thing. Rather than suggesting that establishing a connection with nature, or a concern for the environment, was on the minds of early Chinese thinkers, we can switch our approach to see how we can think *with* them in productive ways.³ Second, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are not exactly the best resources for mobilizing revolutions or enticing people to act in certain ways. Faced with the climate crisis, we need people to take a firm stand, to demand changes of others, to be upset with institutions, to voice their resentment, and put-up noble fights. As will be demonstrated below, these trajectories are, in some ways, not exactly congruent with key Daoist ideas.⁴ Third, these texts never imagined the political schemes we find the world over today. The *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* may be read as advice for political leaders, have been influential for hermetic tendencies, and contain keen coping mechanisms for anyone living within society. However, the role Daoism has to play in democratic policy-making in liberal systems is a strange and difficult (if not far-fetched) question.⁵

These issues notwithstanding, and at the real risk of being just more “blah, blah, blah”, this article explores climate change and Daoism from a very particular angle. There are many avenues which could be productively explored when philosophizing *with* the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The ideas contained in these texts are far-reaching and can help us think about a wide variety of issues. Like any great guides for reflection, this does not always mean the outcome will be what we expect, or what we want. But if we want to think about particular issues, we can

claim—in fact, they often refer to “nature” in early Daoism without any discussion of what this means, or how it is different or similar from “nature” today. Others who promote Daoism as environmentalism, including the special editor of this volume, Eric Nelson (2022), readily admit that these early Daoist terms and contemporary notions of “nature” are significantly different. However, as noted above, in religious Daoism we might find alternative understandings that better fit today’s conceptions of nature. For a broader discussion focused on the *Zhuangzi* and directly targeting the idea of “Eastern wisdom” being able to unlock some key to nature, see Goldin (2005).

- 3 This point has been elaborated on in terms of technology and knowledge, see Allen (2010).
- 4 It has long been argued that Daoism, even in its most socially and politically affirming interpretations, does not suggest people make specific requests of modifying socio-political institutions, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (1983; 2020) and Yang Guorong 楊國榮 (2009), for example, both describe the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as relatively “passive” in this regard, especially when compared to Confucian texts such as the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, or *Xunzi* 荀子. Indeed, Daoism has often been synonymous with hermetic thinking. But even Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), who wrote the most influential commentaries on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, respectively, and who see these texts as thoroughly political, do not think they inspire people to make demands about specific socio-political policies or institutions.
- 5 Discussion of Confucianism and democracy have been quite popular in recent years, while discussions of Daoism and democracy are relatively rare.

turn to these texts and see what they might provide in the way of tools for philosophizing and reformulating them. With environmentalism in mind, we might hone in on growth, or “the logic of increase”: the necessity of acceleration in nearly all social systems, which bows only to the dollar. Daoist texts explicitly reject the desire to increase in many areas. They expound alternatives and poetic warnings of the dangers associated with “increase” in all its nefarious forms: in contention, in feeding desires, in acting for predetermined goals which one is overly attached to, and in ignoring the innate contentment of following one’s natural tendencies.

To this end, this paper will take “environmentalism” and climate change in a broad sense, and will take the problematic aspects revolving around growth, acceleration, and the logic of increase as worthwhile when communicating with Daoist sources. The main argument is that if the logic of increase is a major factor in climate change, then Daoism can be a great resource for thinking about reconstructing our social systems, our interactions, and ourselves in ways that will entail better relationships among humans, and between humans and nature. Climate change is an incredibly complex issue, and while most agree that it is a huge problem there are various ways to classify exactly what has gone wrong, what needs to be changed, and how. It is not possible, nor would it even be useful, to tackle this issue in a single research paper. On this side, I will thus rely mainly on Hartmut Rosa’s notions of acceleration and the “logic of increase” and Clive Hamilton’s related “growth fetish” (be careful when you google that term). Rosa touches upon environmentalism in some places, but is not focused on it. Hamilton directly addresses environmentalism, and his work helps draw Rosa’s into a productive dialogue with Daoism. The treatment of Daoism will be populated by discussions of the following five concepts or attitudes: *buzheng* 不爭 or “not contending”, *zhizu* 知足 or “awareness of contentment”, *wuwei* 無為 or “not acting for”, and *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”.⁶ In discussing Daoism, I will rely heavily on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Major commentators, both traditional and contemporary, will be referenced as insightful and authoritative voices. They are valid insofar as they are useful in appreciating context, drawing out unanticipated connections, and presenting the unfamiliar.

A Methodological Note

Plainly speaking, before environmentalism was brought to Daoism no one else in the long and illustrious history of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* studies found

6 There are many other viable renderings of these terms, and my translations are curated to fit the aims of this paper.

environmentalist concerns in these texts. Contemporary academia, especially in the West, does not really allow this to be a “reason”. But this kind of thinking is exactly how academia functioned and continues to function in China. Despite signalling the virtues of diversity and inclusion as loudly and as capaciously as possible, actually including another way of philosophizing is certainly not welcome in many academic circles in the West. The theme of this special issue—ecology and the environment in Asia—has been read into the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* hundreds of times in the last seventy or so years, and the fact that no one else had done so in the over 2,000-year history of commentary, scholarship, and various types of art inspired by these texts is not only ignored, but actually not even known by many who boast specialization in “comparative/Chinese philosophy”.

If we decided to take the tradition seriously, or to expand our method of philosophizing beyond valorization of unique individual interpretation, we might just see that the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* do not think about the environment or environmental issues the same way we do today. The respect, the listening, and the humility involved here would already be a great boon to academia. In fact, it would actually be an example of the very attitude we should take in thinking about the relationship between humans and nature—however we might decide to define the two, including their inseparability. Less of an emphasis on one’s own self, in all sorts of forms, and in an economic context especially, but also in terms of the use of objects, less competition in some areas, less Promethean drives for mastery over others, things, and the world.⁷ Additionally, we need less obsession with growth or acceleration, and less hubris overall. In terms of philosophical methodology, these orientations would lead us to say something along the lines of: “since the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* have never been discussed in terms of environmentalism, then it probably is not a good idea to think we can find environmentalism in them”. This method would not only say this, but would actually allow that this is a valid “argument” in and of itself. And it would be a great attitude to take in various aspects of life for all sorts of reasons, not the least being a much better relationship with the natural world. In other words, the same type of hubris and self-focused attitude which has come to characterize the human abuses of the natural world are found in methods which ignore tradition when reading ancient texts. We will not solve the former problem by doubling down on the latter.

Relatedly, Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy often complains of being the subject of prejudice and unfair bias. “Our colleagues in Western thought do

7 The detrimental effects of a “Promethean drive for mastery” have been discussed in insightful ways by many authors. See, for example, Michael Sandel’s (2007) critique of genetic enhancement; Clive Hamilton’s (2017) discussion of the Anthropocene, and Graham Parkes’ (2021) work on climate change.

not take us seriously” is a tenor in papers, conferences, and discussions over coffee. For Chinese philosophy to develop as a legitimate philosophical tradition it needs to both gain confidence and stop hiding behind proprietary veils of expertise. We need to stop saying “Dao is just so difficult, you cannot really understand it unless you read classical Chinese” and the like. Like our colleagues who can have discussions on the history of philosophy *and* actually philosophize, specialists of Chinese philosophy need to describe the texts and also work *with* them. There are plenty of papers on Daoism and environmentalism. There are not many which claim to find environmentalism already in Aristotle or the Stoics, though there is no shortage of scholars who utilize Greek thought to vitalize environmentalist discourse. To be taken seriously, Chinese philosophy needs to act seriously. Let us thus philosophize *with* the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and reflect on environmental issues without supposing they already exist in these texts.

Boundary of this Paper

As expressed above, I am in no way suggesting that we can find environmentalist concerns⁸ in the *Laozi* or *Zhuangzi*. However, if we philosophize *with* these texts, then we can reflect on environmentalism in interesting ways. This is the type of philosophical endeavour found, for example, in modern Aristotelians. Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Michael Sandel talk about everything from identity, economics, emotions, and technologies without explicitly referencing the works of Aristotle. They are *inspired* by the great Greek thinker, and work on issues *with* his thought in mind. Similarly, this project is *inspired* by Daoist texts, and seeks to work *with* them—and this also means that I will not seek to defend my classification of Daoism, or enter into any explanation of authorship.⁹

As noted in the introduction, environmentalism is not something early Chinese thinkers engaged with in a way that resembles our discussions today. Proving a negative like this means providing positive evidence for what exactly early Chinese thinkers were talking about when they used terms we might take as “nature”—most notably *tian* 天, *wanwu* 萬物, *ziran*, and the like.¹⁰ Furthermore,

8 By this I mean environmental concerns directly related to those that we have today. This will be fleshed out below.

9 Who today would say to Nussbaum “well, that’s not really what Aristotle wrote, those are more like notes”?

10 Research in this area has been done, see D’Ambrosio (2013) and Chen (2016). The eighth chapter of the latter work is particularly focused on *tian*, and provides an in-depth discussion of its connotations, and why it is not “nature”.

instead of trying to show how something akin to “nature” was thought about—a nearly inexhaustible project which would garner robust disagreement—we could rely on imagination.

For readers familiar with early Chinese thought, or even history in general, it is not difficult to suppose that the views on “nature” and the natural world were quite different hundreds and thousands of years ago. Our drive for mastery has been largely successful. It is not just fire—we have found ingenious ways to dominate the world, and to generally ensure safety. Earlier conceptions of the distinction between the human and nature would undoubtedly include the latter as dangerous, full of uncertainty, and representative of exile (and death). Only with certain levels of technology, strength in numbers, and the like would nature become associated with more romantic notions.

For many early Chinese thinkers the natural world was not apart from the human world. To the extent that the “natural world” was thought of, it was part and parcel of the social. For instance, managing floods or overseeing the change of seasons were examples of human authority at the highest levels. Zhuang Zhou himself might have been an official “pond keeper” of sorts, and there were many types of positions pertaining to the “natural world”. Looking at specific concepts we find even more complex notions, which are difficult to relate to our current views.

The word *she* 社 begins as meaning *dizhu* 地主 or “ruler of the earth/soil” (*Shuowen jizi* 2.2.64; ctext.org), or *tushen* 土神 “god of soil”, it later comes to mean gathering, and eventually makes up the word “society”: *shehui* 社會. In a literal sense *shehui* is “gathering” and can be understood as originating from “gathering at the *she*”. In addition to being the ruler or god of the soil the *she* could mean shrine. This shrine was often the centre of a village and might be a tree. When deciding on a settlement the *she*-tree would be found first, and then the village would grow around it. During different festivals, rituals, or special events, the people from the village would gather at the *she*. For fortuitous events, such as the growth of population represented by marriage, the *she* could be decorated. Unlucky events might see the *she* punished.

There is a complex interplay between the human and the non-human here. In large part the complexity is directly attributed to our being somewhat alienated from this type of thinking. The *she* simultaneously recognizes the natural, and its importance as natural, while also seeing it as a point of convergence for the human. Indeed, this natural *she* is the starting point for human society. Today, our natural landscapes are for the most part natural or social (or at least often thought of this way). The development of a society, such as in a city or even the suburbs, necessitates a corresponding decrease in the natural. Or, at the very least, what

the *she* represents is a rather poignant contrast between the way societies were formed and developed in early China and how they do today. We may see the natural as a point of convergence today, such as when tourists gather to explore the Grand Canyon. But they are strangers who come together for a short period of time. The natural today does not constitute the establishment of a community, as in the case of the *she*.

Exactly how this relates to our contemporary conceptions of the relationship between nature and the human is not only complex, but highly disputable as well. Various explanations could draw interesting points of similarity and difference. No matter how the communication happens, there will surely be those who disagree, or who find “better” (different) ways to think about the *she* and contemporary thought. Overarching any details is the significant difference between this type of thinking about the *she* and “nature” for us today. For most living in cities and suburbs today the *she* is simply a different world of thought. Relatable, yes. Understandable, probably, albeit with significant limitations. But in that *she* world there were not, and in some sense perhaps could not be, the types of distinction, interactions, and problems we think of today when we discuss the relationship between the human and the natural.

Sky's the Limit!

Hartmut Rosa, who is not exactly known as an activist for “green” policies, proposes an interesting take on climate change. According to Rosa, we should think about the climate issue as “being out of sync” with the world. In other words, when certain human processes go too fast for the corresponding natural processes to keep up, changes to ecosystems, environments, and the climate, can occur. So one way to think about the climate problem is to recognize not so much that burning fossil fuels is evil, but that burning them at a rate which cannot be absorbed and thereby impacts our climate might become a serious problem. And we can apply this thinking to many other ecological issues: eating meat, releasing greenhouse gases, even littering and other types of pollution.

A large part of the reason why we damage the environment, and continue to do so despite the increasingly apparent evidence of effects we do not like, can be understood on the human level as the result of (selfish) desires: We struggle to get what we want, to outdo others, and make life as convenient and comfortable as possible. Amazon is an obvious example of this, as are apps that deliver food and groceries. Why is it okay to allow so much waste—in packaging, in gasoline, in time spent—for next day delivery of a notepad or five pens? Or, why is it so

acceptable to order a burger and have so much waste? These examples exemplify not only desire and convenience, but what Rosa thinks is the root problem as well—the logic of increase.¹¹ Simply put, we want more. Personally, but also on larger scales. Nearly all of our social institutions rely on what Rosa calls “dynamic stabilization” to function. Dynamic stabilization means that the system must “move”—which really means “grow”—in order to remain stable. An economy that does not grow is essentially considered to be “shrinking”, despite its actual stagnation and thus staying more or less the same. As academics, our CVs work the same way. If you do not add to your CV, it does not really “stay the same”, but functions, within the academic system, as demonstrating your lack of productivity. Universities always need more, journals seek to produce new knowledge, and most companies can only run—including huge ones like Meta (Facebook) or Google—if they continuously grow.

Once we recognize the logic of increase or dynamic stabilization as the underlying and necessary pattern of our societies, we cannot help but to see it everywhere. In some cases it has become so natural that it is difficult to acknowledge. There are some rather serious questions we can ask ourselves following these lines of thought. For example: Why must we constantly publish papers to demonstrate some “new knowledge”, as if passing down old knowledge was not good enough? (Perhaps we would have a lot fewer problems today if we learned more seriously from the past—as this special issue attempts to demonstrate. Relatedly, while we might like increase of knowledge in areas like medicine, it is not always useful in other areas such as building foundations for houses or plumbing.) We can also ask: Should it really be accepted, natural and obvious to everyone that businesses, including US universities, must constantly increase their profits? This is, of course, the root of much of our climate problems, since fossil fuels offer so many cheap shortcuts to making money (think again of all those delivery services).

Clive Hamilton, a self-styled “provocateur”, explains the need for growth in even more negative terms. Describing his work on the “growth fetish” in today’s world, Hamilton writes:

For decades our political leaders and opinion makers have touted higher incomes as the way to a better future. Economic growth means better lives for us all. But after many years of sustained economic growth and increased personal incomes we must confront an awful fact: we aren’t any happier. This is the great contradiction of modern politics.... far from

11 Rosa is not the only or even the first thinker to note this issue. However, for the sake of this article we will focus specifically on his work as that is what the author is most familiar with. Additionally, it is not really necessary to delve too much deeper into this characterization in this article.

being the answer to our problems, growth fetishism and the marketing society lie at the heart of our social ills. They have corrupted our social priorities and political structures, and have created a profound sense of alienation among young and old. (Hamilton 2004)

Not only does growth leave us unfulfilled and corrupted, it is exactly this type of obsession that has led to the “*monstrous* anthropocentrism” that causes our processes to outrun natural ones—one of the consequence of which is climate change. As a result, Hamilton argues that we must actually take responsibility for our anthropocentrism, which he calls a “fact”, and use our technologies correctly. He writes:

The problem is not that humans are anthropocentric, but that we are not anthropocentric enough. This might sound like the kind of transgressive statement concocted to startle but which with repeated use feels like an authorial ploy. But it is in fact the essential claim of this book: we refuse to face up to the profound importance of humans, ontologically and now practically, to the Earth and its future. Instead of accepting responsibility for the power we possess, we continue to exercise it rashly as if nothing else mattered. (Hamilton 2017, 44–45)

For those familiar with Chinese philosophy, it is straightaway evident that the way Hamilton discusses our relationship with the Earth is worlds away from how any pre-Qin thinker would think of our technological abilities. Perhaps with ritual we would find some similar assumptions, but never with the force, scale, or sheer power Hamilton speaks of. And when we look at many voices from climate issues we find that human technological reach is viewed as the problem, and must in some ways engender the solutions. In other words, short of advocating moving back to more primitive lives,¹² we will need to include our technological abilities in our solutions to climate issues. On this point Daoist thought is extremely limited in what productive contributions it might make. Indeed, it is pertinent to include a note on methodology before we continue.

A Daoist Lexicon and Focusing Tradition

In what follows we will look at four major notions in early Daoism, namely: 1) *buzheng* 不爭 or “not contending”, 2) *zhizu* 知足 or “awareness of contentment”,

12 Some groups do advocate this, for example some strains of XR (Extinction Rebellion) call for small communal living as a solution.

3) *wuwei* 無為 or “not acting for”, 4) *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”. These ideas are intimately interwoven, or we may take them as not so much distinct concepts as various perspectives on an underlying attitude. As attitudes and as avenues of philosophical reflection we will examine these terms with nods to environmental considerations, as outlined above. Our discussion will be purposefully open-ended, both because philosophy itself can be a type of reflection that does not demand detailed conclusions,¹³ and because Daoism emphatically resists specified prescriptive advice, rejects ideals, and is cautious about language. The opening lines of the *Laozi* emphasize a major theme in the tradition: “the way that can be spoken is not the constant way, the name that can be named is not the constant name (道可道非常道，名可名非常名)”. In an even more succinct fashion, one of the most famous lines in the *Zhuangzi* simply says “a path is made in the walking, things are so due to their being called so (道行之而成，物謂之而然)” (2.6). Accordingly, with regard to prescriptive advice, ideals, and exacting language, this project will not force these texts into areas they overtly reject.

The manner in which these four concepts will be discussed, as well as the gloss of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as relatively coherent texts, and even the label “Daoism” itself, represents a slight departure from contemporary Western academic standards. Recent fashions in journals and presentations ask scholars to first admit that the dating and authorship of these texts is highly contestable, and that for many, very important reasons the label “Daoism” is misleading. In China, where commentaries were the major medium for philosophical development, broad strokes were used when appropriate. Ideas were often expressed with a nuanced focus on practical (socio-political) applicability and the cultivation of persons and communities. To this day, much of Chinese academia functions with a nod to commentaries, practice, cultivation, and authority; and insofar as it does, it often differs from Western standards. Contrasted with the latter, we might describe Chinese philosophy as “tradition-focused”.

We can understand “tradition-focused” in a dual sense: 1) tradition itself plays a central role in expressing ideas, developing arguments (such as, “environmentalism

13 One can argue, however, that recent academia disagrees. Not only are solutions often called for, or specific answers and detailed responses, but even the very line of thinking and discussing do not favour reflection. Instead many scholars interrogate one another about the final answer to whatever question is being posed. For example, when presenting on moral ideas one will almost inevitably be asked how can one be sure that no one can use the said ideas for anything bad. In other words, academics will ask, more or less directly, “How can you guarantee Nazis won’t use this thinking?” It is a ridiculous line of inquiry, supposing both that there could be anything that would inherently be protected from being misinterpreted or otherwise abused, and that discussions in a conference hall or academic paper are not best suited for reflection, and will somehow directly result in X or Y actions.

does not appear in the tradition, so ...”), and maintaining coherence; 2) texts, persons, and ideas are not divorced from their traditional context—so, for example, while Western scholars obsess over whether we can use the label “Daoism”, Chinese scholars do not. They tend to understand “Daoism” in terms of how it functions in a particular discussion, not as some abstract exact description devoid of contextual factors.¹⁴ Relatedly, a significant standard for evaluating philosophical thought in China has been *tong* 通, as in “*shuo de tong* 說得通”—which finds some degree of coherence with “what you said makes sense” in English. *Tong* can mean “through”, “unimpeded”, “open”, and “without obstacle”, “communicate”, “link”, or be “well-versed in”. Saying someone’s thought is *tong* means that it does not contradict itself, that it speaks to the entire context (e.g. works for this debate or rings true with the entire *Laozi*), and that it finds reflection in the tradition. It does, however, not indicate some adherence to the “true meaning” of the “original text”.

The “tradition-focused” approach rejects the “urtext”, which has also become quite a fashionable target in Western academia. But while the latter moves toward creativity and individual interpretation, the tradition-focused methodology requires coherence to the past in its support of “new” interpretations. Or, while Western academia demands a new contribution (growth), tradition-focused research requires a command of past understandings—which of course can only result in “I only transmit, I do not make (述而不作)” (*Lunyu* 7.1).

Tradition-focused methodology is not “better” than what contemporary Western academia encourages. It is simply a different form of doing scholarship, one which is valid and leads to different understandings. Allowing “Chinese thought to have a seat at the table” or “promoting diversity and inclusion” should mean being open to this method as well. As we all know, form is content and content is form. Western academia should remember this as well when it self-congratulatorily celebrates diversity and inclusivity—all the while remaining exceedingly narrow in the type of research it allows. Moreover, we should not pretend that when we force certain texts into certain discussions with certain methods we will not certainly get a very certain result, and one that certainly might have little to do with the text or its tradition.

14 For example, a “tradition-focused” study might advance conclusions about the *Laozi* based on Wang Bi’s version of the text, and completely ignore excavated versions. This type of study is accurate in terms of describing how the *Laozi* was traditionally read, and how it influenced countless people. As long as a study thus positions itself, discrepancies between Wang Bi’s *Laozi* and Mawangdui versions are neither here nor there—the latter did not impact the tradition. Of course, in another arena comparing Wang Bi’s *Laozi* with Mawangdui strips is completely valid, and we might even give overwhelming priority to “King Ma’s Mound”.

Not Contending 不爭

Bu zheng 不爭, which can be translated as “not struggling”, “not contending”, “not competing” and the like, is identified by numerous Chinese thinkers as a major theme in the *Laozi* (e.g. Chen 2020; Fu Peirong 傅佩榮 2012). Relatively speaking, this concept garners much less attention in English language scholarship—which is not to say that *bu zheng* is ignored, only that it is often merely mentioned in passing. When looking to early Daoism for resources to reflect on contemporary environmental issues, *bu zheng* provides an excellent inroad. Starting here we can draw out a host of tools for reconsidering some of our most unreflected-upon perspectives.

Like other major concepts—including *zhizu*, *wuwei*, and *ziran*—*bu zheng* is best understood as an attitude. According to Chen Guying, who follows a scholarly consensus, *bu zheng* includes these other notions as well. At its heart, *bu zheng* rejects “struggles for fame, fortune, success” (Chen 2020, 405) and seeks to counter ceaseless struggles for selfish desires, personal gain, and what we can call “egoism”. Chen notes that *bu zheng* specifically encourages people to “‘act,’ to develop their abilities to the utmost while following what is natural and self-so [*ziran*]” (ibid.). Even so, it is not about the development of the individual themselves, it includes a “spirit of devotion to others” as well as “not vying with others for success or fame”, and this “constitutes one of the greatest forms of moral conduct” (ibid.).

One of the more critical sections in the *Laozi* that directly mentions *bu zheng* is found in chapter 81. This can be translated as follows:

Credible words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not credible.
 Those who are good do not quarrel, those who quarrel are not good.
 Those who know are not erudite, those who are erudite do not know.
 The sage does not accumulate, because he acts on behalf of others, he has more; because he gives to others, more will be his share.
 The Dao of Heaven brings benefit without harming; the Dao of human beings acts without contending [*bu zheng*]. (Chen 2020, 403)

There is much here readily relatable to our ecological troubles—quarrels, accumulation, acting for others rather than oneself, and not harming or contending are all attitudes which the *Laozi* (along with countless other texts) thinks would help individuals in their own lives, in their interactions, and potentially in human-nature relations.

Specifically, *bu zheng* can be understood as following natural patterns. Heshang Gong 河上公 (d. 1st or 2nd century BCE) says that *bu zheng* is related to modelling (*fa* 法) Heaven (*tian* 天) and not contending for merit, fame, or reputation (*gong-ming* 功名) (ctext.org). Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (d. 669) more or less echoes Heshang saying the sage “models *dao*” and “achieves merit but does not dwell on it. He relinquishes the merit to the beings; therefore the text says he does not compete [*bu zheng*]” (Assandri 2021, 365). The modesty and humility expressed here is a core *ethos* which simply would not allow for an obsessive fixation on one’s self, competition, growth, and other aspects of contemporary society which have led to human activities overloading natural processes.

The *Zhuangzi* relates a similar sentiment, again encouraging a psychology of respect and humility in the face of social and natural contingencies:

And he whose knowledge is sufficient to fill some one post, or whose deeds meet the needs of some one village, or whose personal virtues please some one ruler, or who is able to prove himself in a single country, sees himself in just the same way. (1.3)¹⁵

The critical message here hinges on an expansive awareness of one’s own natural endowments, of social systems, and of the word writ large as all being completely contingent. That things line up to support a person, or that they do not, should not elicit overattachment. As the text says, “even if the entire world praises one they should not be goaded on, and even if the whole world criticizes one they should not get upset”. The passage ends with notes about how to conceive of these issues: “The utmost person has no self, the spirit person has no merit, and the sage has no name/reputation”. Here “no self”, “no merit” and “no name/reputation” do not mean that the type of person the *Zhuangzi* praises actually lacks these—that would not be possible—rather they do not rely on, or commit themselves to, self, merit, or reputation. That many people do, the *Zhuangzi* notes, is problematic.

Social arenas are often populated by people contending with one another. Over the past century countless psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have sought to prove the basic observation we find in nearly all human groups: hierarchies exist, and are spontaneously created as soon as people come together. Asking that people try and take on a *bu zheng* attitude means moving away from certain neo-liberal and free market conceptions of the individual and their relations to others. Becoming a hermit or shunning society is not the goal, but rather balancing a healthy distance from social norms is advocated. Overcommitting is dangerous. Overattachment is the main target of criticism.

15 Translations not otherwise noted are my own. The chapter verse numbering refers to ctext.org.

Various descriptions of this attitude can be found in the works of, for example, Wang Deyou, who advances the idea of “social hermits” (2012), or in Brook Ziporyn’s notion of a “wild card” (2020) or Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D’Ambrosio’s somewhat problematic “genuine pretending” (2017). A more positive conception would say Daoists ask what might be “beneficial to the surrounding world and people in it” (Chen 2020, 43). As Chen Guying further notes: “The goal is to balance out social inequalities, which otherwise foster more conflict and struggle, through *bu zheng*—that is, acting in a self-so manner that benefits all of humankind, not just oneself” (ibid.).

Whether one emphasizes social hermits, wild cards, or benefiting humankind, the type of thinking related to *bu zheng* has consequences that can be contoured to fit contemporary environmental concerns. *Bu zheng* can be construed in various ways, the majority of which would certainly change how we think about ourselves, others, and our relationship with the natural environment along lines which many would consider positive.

Awareness of Contentment 知足

The first chapter of the *Laozi* contains the line: “*gu chang wu you yi guan qi miao; chang you you yi guan qi jiao* 故常無欲以觀其妙；常有欲以觀其徼”. In a famously obtuse text, this is one of the most contested set of characters. Depending on how one parses it, it can read either “Thus, constant non-presence, [one] wants to look at the subtlety; constant presence, [one] wants to look at the fringes”, or “Thus, constantly having desires [one] looks at the subtlety; constantly not having desires, [one] looks at the fringes”.

Yang Lihua 楊立華, explicitly following Wang Bi and Jiang Xichang 蔣錫昌 (d. 1974), and referencing the Mawangdui slips, follows the second reading. Early Chinese thought, he says, is never about “extremes”, and so there is no idea of actually not having desires (Yang 2020). For Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius, people have desires and could never extinguish them. So rather than trying to get rid of desires the great pre-Qin thinkers suggest methods for dealing with them. The reference to desires in the first chapter of the *Laozi* is thus about various attitudes people can take when looking at the world—it is not about completely ridding oneself of desires or not.

This difference in attitude, between focusing on human desires and not, affects how we view the world. Looking at the development of things, Yang argues, will be heavily influenced by whether or not they are seen through the lens of human desires. Although he does not use the word “mechanistic”, Yang basically says

as much in his examples of how human desires change our world. Desires change what we see, they change how we see things, our interactions with them, and how we treat them as well. He notes that all sorts of foods today are now so heavily modified by modern technologies that most of us have never really eaten an apple or meat—even if we get the most organic or grass-fed versions. Broadening his discussion Yang says, “If you take the perspective of no desires [not having overly mechanistic goals], only then can you see the development of things in a natural way, otherwise you destroy the natural development of things”. “And this is,” he adds “a basic attitude towards nature in the Chinese tradition”. (Yang 2020, 32:12). Today, especially in the West, Yang thinks that there are not only innumerable desires (mechanistic goals), but, even worse, many think that further technological developments can solve everything.

While there is no shortage of debate about the above-mentioned line from chapter one, Yang’s discussion of desires is generally agreed upon as an overarching perspective in the *Laozi*. The most commonly referenced term to express what Yang describes is *zhi zu* 知足, or “awareness of contentment”. It is about being aware of one’s desires, satisfying them, and then moving on. (Another common translation for *zhi zu* is along the lines of “knowing satisfaction”. The general idea is the same: know what one desires, and be conscious of when one is satisfied.) Overindulging in desires is problematic, but so too is not fulfilling them to the right degree.

We can take spicy food as an example. If one likes spicy food, then it is fine to have spicy food. But once one begins desiring to have spicier and spicier food—when a person becomes too mechanistic about their desire, about themselves, the world, and the relations of them all—problems arise. One might try, but in the end it is not possible to satisfy the desire for “spicier” food. There is always something “spicier”, so one can never get the “spiciest”. However, if one keeps their desires limited to “I want spicy food” then they can easily be satisfied, and then can easily move on. (We can change “spicier food” for a faster car, making more money, more likes/views on social media, a bigger house—nearly anything works here.)

Zhi zu is only referenced four times in the *Laozi*, but it is, as Yang notes, an underlying theme that is represented in numerous places (regardless of how one reads chapter 1). The first mention is in chapter 33, which includes the line “*zhi zu zhe fu* 知足者富”. This can be translated “one who is aware of contentment is rich”. Wang Bi glosses this as meaning one does not “want for anything” (Lynn 1999, 111). In the other sections where *zhi zu* is mentioned, chapters 44 and 46, Wang does not elaborate on the meaning of *zhi zu* at all. Indeed, looking at his

commentary as a whole one might conclude that for Wang Bi the meaning is quite apparent. Simply fulfil one's desires and do not let them grow. This is a point that is quite easily understandable but difficult to put into practice. For instance, a good friend once lost a lot of weight. Many asked "How were you able to lose so much weight? An extreme diet? Lots of exercise?" My friend said "No, I just stopped eating when I was full". Most people had trouble believing him. He would then add—"I didn't eat when I wasn't hungry, either".

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (d. 669) offers a more robust account of "one who is aware of contentment is rich". Cheng writes: "Accepting one's lot and knowing to be content with oneself, one does not crave and strive anymore. And then one not only will not crave material wealth, but also Dao and Virtue will be plentiful" (Assandri 2021, 176). Being content with one's "lot" or "*fen* 分" is a common theme in the *Zhuangzi* as well. It refers to everything from natural dispositions, including talents and all sorts of capabilities, to social recognition of them, and all other types of contingencies.

In chapter 44 the *Laozi* says that being aware of satisfaction will help one not be disgraced or humiliated. Again, Cheng invokes the idea of natural and social contingencies to explain this: "If one knows from one's own experience that precious goods and possessions are empty and vain, one keeps to one's allotted part and does not covet more. If one is honest and upright and knows to be content with one's lot, then because of this one will suffer no disgrace" (Assandri 2021, 223–24). Within the context of chapter 44 Cheng's comment can be read as just a further explication of what is already given. The meaning of *zhi zu* is very much worn on its sleeve.

Zhi zu appears twice in chapter 46. The entire chapter reads:

When the world has the Dao, que 却 [retreat, return] the riding horses (走马) go to fertilize the fields [instead of being used in war]. When the world does not have the Dao, army horses born on the outskirts [farm horses are used for battle]. There is no greater disaster than desiring to obtain, there is no greater calamity than not knowing satisfaction. Therefore, the satisfaction of knowing satisfaction is lasting satisfaction. (Chen 2020, 271; translation modified)

Not knowing satisfaction is the worst thing, and knowing satisfaction ensures satisfaction lasts a long time. In agreement with Yang's comment about "extremes" and desires in general, Hu Jichuang 胡寄窗 (d. 1993) argues that "knowing satisfaction" basically means "having few desires". The two notions "cannot be clearly separated". Referencing chapter 33, Hu notes that "knowing satisfaction" is itself a type of wealth. A person might be poor, but if they can know satisfaction

they can feel rich, conversely a rich person can (and often does) easily feel poor when then focus on getting more (Hu 1962, 209). (Indeed, modern economic theory and psychology have come to the same conclusion.)

We can easily wax theoretical or romantic about *zhi zu* and modern society. We are too focused on bigger, more, and the like. Our societies are overly capitalistic, Christmas and birthdays are all about money, and so on. *Zhi zu* is an attitude. It applies just as much to an over-emphasis on GDP as it does to eating too much. According to its own advice, it is probably best to think of *zhi zu* starting from small, mundane examples. It is not so much about a “revelation” or “enlightenment”, as about adjusting one’s perspective on the world.

Not Acting For 無為

In the context of this paper we can understand *wuwei* 無為 as “not acting for”.¹⁶ It is another perspective on the attitude the *Laozi* promotes, or an attitude itself. *Wu* 無 negates *wei* 為, which means action, but most often includes the connotation of acting for some purpose, reason, or goal. Again, the more romantic depictions of *wuwei* sometimes suggest we can live in an entirely spontaneous manner, floating seamlessly in the world around us. However, as Yang Lihua notes, once again borrowing from many others, there is no way humans could somehow be completely devoid of purposes, goals, or preconceived notions. To add a modern twist, human thinking operates according to cause and effect. Even in terms of small details, or our best attempts at “going with the flow”, we do in fact think that what we do will have certain results. *Wuwei* is then about an openness to the contingency of our world, ourselves, and interactions. And while we may all appreciate some level of unpredictability and uncontrollability, *wuwei* asks us to keep this space relatively large, and to remain calm in doing so. From this angle, appreciating *bu zheng* and *zhi zu* already informs much of what we might call the “content” of *wuwei*.

In addition to already encompassing the attitude of *bu zheng* as well as *zhi zu*, *wuwei* allows for recognizing the broader potentials of each. *Bu zheng* can mean not contending, and is often considered in a social sphere. *Zhi zu* asks for one to be satisfied with themselves and in relation to others and society. The emphasis on *action* per se in *wu wei* extends what it might mean to not contend and to be satisfied in even more mundane contexts. It can inform how we think of acting,

16 While there are many very excellent ways of conceptualizing *wuwei*, our goal here is not to come up with the “best” or “most complete” but rather a discussion that fits well the context of this paper, and has coherence (*tong 通*) with the *Laozi* and traditional scholarship.

i.e. instead of saying “I am going to run for X minutes or X km” we could think instead, “I will go out and enjoy a run”. Although the latter too can be subject to overly *wei* or “acting for” thinking as well: “I must enjoy this run!” or “How do I ensure that I enjoy this run?!”¹⁷ *Bu zheng* and *zhi zu* can thus act as buffers to keep *wuwei* in check, or to help balance *wuwei* so it does not slip too far into *wei* or “acting for”. In other words, these three notions or attitudes can operate in sync, allowing for different points of reflection for when one is too heavily invested to notice one’s own slide into extremes.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into too much detail about *wuwei*. This cognate appears many times in the *Laozi*, and there are particularities to each that can warrant detailed analysis. When concentrating on the detrimental aspects of growth, the occurrence of *wuwei* in chapter 48 is most pertinent. This chapter can be translated as:

For learning daily increasing, for the Dao daily decreasing. Decreasing and decreasing, to the point of *wuwei*. *Wuwei* and thereby nothing is not done. Taking up the world always relies on *wu shi* 无事 [no affairs], when it comes to *you shi* 有事 [have affairs] (6) it is not enough for taking up the world. (Chen 2020, 279; translation modified)

Jiang Xichang connects “learning” with the opposite of *wuwei*, namely *youwei* 有為 or “acting for”. Activities related to *dao* involve decreasing the “for”, in other words, decreasing our goals and purposes (Jiang 1981, 89). Or, we may say that activities related to *dao* are more in line with the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the world. Regardless of when one dates the *Laozi*, the learning it responds to is connected to rituals, music, and other sorts of social institutions that seek to codify interaction into predictable and controllable patterns. Remembering Yang Lihua, we should not expect to get rid of these entirely, but we can certainly seek to rely on them less. In his comments to this section Heshang Gong says “learning” means learning about government, ritual, and music (<https://ctext.org/heshanggong/48>).

Writing on this chapter of the *Laozi* Wang Bi singles out “acting for” (*youwei*) as particularly problematic. What he writes is striking in its simplicity: Acting

17 It is precisely for this reason that Wang Bi and Guo Xiang, in their development on these ideas as well as those found in other texts, dislike following “traces” or “footprints.” Richard John Lynn writes: “Fundamental in Guo’s commentary is his concept of “footprints” [*ji* 迹]—that is, the recollections in legends and accounts of sagely thought, action, behaviour, and pronouncement that, since these always fall short of the realities involved, falsely establish standards for people to follow, which then corrupt natural inclinations to the good and damage original personal nature.” (Lynn 2022, lxx)

for can result in failure, whereas *wuwei* cannot, because it is not overly attached even to its implicit goals (<https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu>). Commenting on *wu shi* 无事 [no affairs], which is related to *wuwei*, Wang says that it means “constantly moving in accordance [with things]” (ibid.). The “accord” or *yin* 因 will be further discussed below as it relates directly to *ziran*.

Chapter 57 contains another instance of *wuwei* which helps us understand what being in accord with things might look like. The paradoxical logic the *Laozi* often expresses, especially as found in chapter 2, is elaborated on in detail in the second part of chapter 57, here we find:

The more prohibitions and taboos there are in the world, the more impoverished the people will become; if people have many sharp instruments, the state and families will become more and more shrouded in darkness; if people use many clever techniques, strange things will arise ever more often; the more conspicuous laws and decrees become, the more bandits and robbers there will be. (Chen 2020, 316; translation modified)

The more positive side of this, which relies on a certain notion of human beings as basically being “okay”,¹⁸ is immediately laid out:

And so the sage says: “I am *wuwei*, and the people self-transform (自化); I delight in tranquillity, and the self *zheng* 正 [upright, correct, align, rectify]; I do not undertake anything, and the people self thrive; I am without desires, and the people self-simplify.” (ibid.; translation modified)

Being *wuwei* allows those around the sage to act according to their own selves—something we might often associate with being “natural”. The general argument here is reflected in *Zhuangzi* 11.4 as well, where it is extended to all things: “If you rest in *wuwei* then all things can self-transform (汝徒處無為，而物自化).” Allowing people or things to “self-transform” means not interfering too much with how they are. Transformation is something that constantly happens, so the emphasis is not on them *changing* in natural ways, but rather in them being natural in their constant changing. This is tightly intertwined with *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”.

According to Itself 自然

Ziran 自然 or “according to itself” or “self-so” can be explained differently based on specific contexts. At the core these two characters express “something itself”

¹⁸ For a further discussion see D’Ambrosio (2022) or Fu (2012).

(*zi* 自) and “going by” (*ran* 然). Often *ziran* is translated as “nature”, and can mean the natural world—but again the entire conception of this is different in early Chinese, as the *she* example discussed above shows. In modern Chinese the word for “nature” is *ziranjie* 自然界 or “the natural realm” which is meant to express some distinction from humans.¹⁹

Just as *wuwei* is intimately interwoven with *bu zheng* and *zhi zu*, there are no shortage of scholars who note the connection between *wuwei* and *ziran*. Guo Xiang, for example, connects them:

Unselfconscious action [*wuwei*] does not mean to fold one’s hands and just keep silent. As long as everyone is allowed to do what is innately doable, each natural endowment [*ziran*] shall be at ease. (Lynn 2022, 210)

Things being allowed to go by their own natural dispositions, endowments, or nature, means not interfering with them. However, there is no way things cannot be constantly interfered with or constantly influenced by everything else. No one thing is thought of as existing, potentially or actually, in a way that is not always already intimately interconnected with all other things. For example, not only do the words you read right now affect your thoughts, but there are countless other factors involved as well. The medium through which you read hugely changes how you read: On a screen or printed (and if it was handwritten things are different once again), and there are many other variables too, if printed then in the form of a journal or just a printed PDF or Word document—because this again will influence how you read, how much information you retain, and the like.²⁰ Moreover, the temperature of the environment you are in, and everything from what you had for breakfast and how you are digesting it to your culture and genetic makeup will all inform, in some way or another, how you read this paper.²¹ Everything is constantly interconnected and constantly transforming due to its interconnectedness. So letting things go “of their own accord” can be broken down into two different orientations of understanding.

First, *ziran* is an attitude, second it can be seen concretely in governance. There have long been two major orientations in traditional readings the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. One can take them as mainly political, and this is quite easy to understand in the *Laozi* (and greatly informs Guo Xiang’s *Zhuangzi*) or one can read them as advice for individuals. Of course, many readings of these texts see them as both, and differ only in degrees of one reading or the other. Indeed, we

19 For a detailed discussion see D’Ambrosio (2013).

20 Some literature on this issue is summarized by Nicholas Carr (2010).

21 In his book *Behave* (2017) Robert Sapolsky provides a fascinating study of these influences.

may simply understand the reflections on individual lives to be similarly echoed in political realms—or *vice-versa*. In other words, the texts make observations and provide some advice, and the only difference between a more existential or socio-political reading has to do with slightly different applications. Again, most of the “messages” or advice or points of reflection are then generally overlapping. Commenting on the opening lines of chapter 11 in the *Zhuangzi* Guo Xiang neatly interweaves individual considerations with political ones:

Letting it be [you] allows it to exist freely on its own [zizai], which results in order, but if one tries to put it in order, disorder [luan] results. Human life is inherently simple and straightforward [zhi], so if nothing tries to lead it astray, one won't attempt to exceed one's natural endowment [xingming], and natural desires and aversions won't be distorted. If those in authority don't practice unselfconscious action [wuwei], actions taken by them will result in everyone conforming to them. This is why having been seduced into liking and desiring things people are wont to exceed the limits of their natural endowment. Therefore, what is valued in the sage king is not his ability to put things in order but the fact that by practicing unselfconscious action [wuwei], he allows people to behave spontaneously [ziwei]. (Lynn 2022, 207)

The simplicity and straightforwardness of life Guo Xiang focuses on is reflected throughout both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The former speaks directly of being simple, plain, uncarved, and not getting too caught up in evaluations (chapter 2) or desires (as we saw with *zhi zu*). The *Zhuangzi* consistently seeks some “equalizing” methods, which note differences, for example between the big and the small, and rejects devising general standards for thinking about them. We find this throughout the *Zhuangzi*. One of the more famous passages reads:

To be truly unskewed just means not to lose the uncontrived condition of the inborn nature and its allotment of life [彼正正者，不失其性命之情] The long is not excessive and the short is not deficient. The duck's neck may be short, but lengthening it would surely pain him; the swan's neck may be long, but cutting it short would surely grieve him. When we see that what is long by inborn nature [xing 性] is not to be lengthened, all the worries that go with trying to remove them disappear. (Ziporyn 2020, 78)

When Guo Xiang says that the sage king should be *wuwei* and allow things to develop in a *ziran* manner, he is speaking of not extending or shortening things. Again, describing this in too much detail is not really possible since *ziran* is

indicative of an attitude. Being *ziran* or not does not directly correspond with any particular behaviours. The *Zhuangzi* passage quoted above actually ends by listing people who were quite opposite from one another, such as Robber Zhi and Bo Yi, and notes that though they represent different ideals, they are the same in “perverting and distorting” themselves (Ziporyn 2020, 79). It might be *ziran* for someone to go for a 14-mile run, for another person that would be absolute agony, or a challenge or a goal. If we take *ziran* as a measure, or as a guideline for action, we are left with little to say outside of particular contexts, and broad considerations of many things involved. The *Laozi* reminds directly of this in a passage which has often been misinterpreted by those hoping to find environmental and ecological themes in early Daoism, namely, chapter 25.

Many scholars appeal to *ziran* as “nature” in their attempts to read environmentalism in early Daoism. Ann Pang-White provides a representative example of the trajectory taken in such arguments:

The Laozi addresses the moral significance of Nature as follows: “Man models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after Tao [Dao]. And Tao models itself after Nature (*ziran*)” (Daodejing 25). It adds: “Why is Dao esteemed and virtue honoured? ... [I]t is due to the fact that they always follow the natural/nature (*ziran*)” (Daodejing 51; my translation). An ideal person, therefore, “is one with Nature. Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao” (Daodejing 16). (Pang-White 2009, 71)

We can focus on the last line of chapter 25 in the *Laozi*, which is often held up as an important example for those who wish to argue for a concept of nature in Daoism. This line simply reads: “*ren fa di, di fa tian, tian fa dao, dao fa ziran* 人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然”. A fairly literal translation could be “human models/follows the earth, the earth models/follows the heavens, the heavens model/follow *dao*, *dao* models/follows *ziran*”, although the first character already requires some clarification. *Ren* 人 or “human” is often mistakenly glossed as a mere biological label. In fact, it is more complex. Some texts use it to indicate a moral person, or person of a certain moral status. In the *Mencius* for example, a human being can be considered *fei ren* 非人 or literally “not human”. Relatedly, *ren* 人 can be indicative of “community” in the sense that it denotes people in a certain socio-political sphere. (The contrast here is with barbarians, who are not *ren* 人 because they are not part of the cultured socio-political sphere.)

The Earth and Heavens maybe be taken somewhat straightforwardly as indicating the seasons, weather, and the like. In an agricultural setting it would be quite

natural to observe the way humans model the Earth, and the Earth models the Heavens. *Dao* can mean quite a number of different things, but here we may gloss it as the “way” and take it to be some sort of underlying pattern that all things are in accord with. *Ziran* is then the tricky term. Ann Pang-White, like some other contemporary scholars, has attempted to read this as “Nature”. Speaking of early Daoism Meng Peiyuan 蒙培元 for instance, says that “Nature [*ziran jie* 自然界] is the mother-entity [*muti* 母体] of *dao*” (Meng 2004, 28). While a host of other scholars, from Heshang Gong and Wang Bi to Tong Shuye 童書業 (d. 1968) and Chen Guying have taken *ziran* to mean “self-so” or “according to itself”, Meng rejects this reading on a linguistic basis. The phrase contains a series of nouns, which would make *ziran*—as an adjective or adverb—a strange anomaly. Smoothing these tensions out Wang Yan 王炎 and Wang Bo 王博 have both suggested reading *ziran* as a noun, adjective and adverb (Wang 2010; Wang 2004). In other words, *ziran* indicates the basic natural tendencies or dispositions of things. In this way modelling *ziran* is something everything does. There is nothing higher or outside of humans, the Earth, the Heavens, or *dao*.

In his commentary to this section Wang Bi provides a concise discussion for how we should think about *ziran*:

Dao does not go against *ziran*, thus it obtains its nature disposition (*xing* 性) following/modelling *ziran*ness. As square thus following/modelling square, as circle following/modelling circle, not going against *ziran* in any way, expressionless in speaking of it, boundless in referring to it. [In other words, language cannot describe it.] (<https://cortex.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu>)

Conclusion

When Xunzi criticizes Zhuangzi for being “blinded by the Heavens, and not knowing humans (莊子蔽於天而不知人)” (Xunzi 21.5) he means that the *Zhuangzi* does not promote ritual, music, and studying as means for cultivating the person. Instead, the *Zhuangzi* critically reflects on how these things can be both useful and harmful. The focus on the heavenly or natural in the *Zhuangzi* is relative, especially compared to Xunzi and other Confucian texts where humans are central. The *Zhuangzi* does not conceive of the environment or “nature” in the way we do today, nor does the *Laozi*. And it is precisely because of this that these texts offer great points of reflection. Truly, they are blinded by the “sky”, but the sky has a limit. We can engage *with* these texts when thinking about environmental issues, but it is mistaken to look for concerns similar to ours *in* them.

We also find phrases such as “unifying humans and the natural/Heavens 天人合一” and “the natural/Heavens and humans are distinct 天人之分” in Chinese tradition. The first asks humans to be united with the Heavens, or “nature” in some sense, while the second notes the distinct roles humans and “nature” have in their interactions. What these phrases might mean in our age is unclear. When focusing on growth as a problem, they might encourage us to make sure our processes are in sync with natural ones. This is, however, something we all know. Environmental problems today are not so much a matter of people not knowing what they should do. Most people know exactly what they should do, they just need to do it.

At this point in the ecological crisis, I do not think popularizing Daoism is a timely approach. To be sure, I doubt it will make things worse, but I also am hesitant to imagine that it would make things all that much better. Problems with systems require appropriate systemic transformations. In other words, *bu zheng*, *zhi zu*, *wuwei* and *ziran* might encourage people to do what they already know they should do: drive electric cars, bring one’s own shopping bag, eat less meat. Yes, that would be great, but even if everyone the world over acted this way it likely would not be enough. Only when political leaders and business owners shift their priorities can our environmental problems be solved. According to those who identify growth as the main problem, we need nothing short of an entire overhaul of our capitalist systems. If somehow *bu zheng*, *zhi zu*, *wuwei* and *ziran* had an impact on capitalism itself—which would thereby no longer be capitalism as we know it—then things for us and our environments would actually change.

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The “Greening” of Daoism: Potential and Limits

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Abstract

In recent decades there has been much discussion of Daoist thought in the light of environmental or ecological ethics. In this paper, I will discuss the meanings of *ziran* and *wuwei*, the two key terms in Daoism within its own tradition and then explore the possibility of establishing a form of “green Daoism” through an interpretative reconstruction of a *ziran-wuwei* ethic that is relevant to environmental and ecological concerns. I will argue that the Daoist idea of *ziran-wuwei* does not simply mean to accept things passively, but rather it entails a proactive dimension that can be used to challenge aggressiveness and destructive attitudes towards eco-cosmic unity and diversity. The paper intends to show that although some of the ecological issues we address today may not be the major concerns of ancient Daoism, and that the complexity of the ecological problems and solutions are dependent on modern technology, it will not prevent us from taking Daoism as a cultural resource with which we can examine the human place in nature in view of the current environmental crisis.

Keywords: Daoism, environmental ethics, animal ethics, anthropocentrism, *ziran*, *wuwei*

»Ozelenitev« daoizma: potencial in omejitve

Izvleček

V zadnjih desetletjih je bilo veliko razprav na temo daoistične misli v luči okoljevarstvenih ali ekoloških etik. V prispevku bom razpravljala o pomenu narave (*ziran*) in nedelovanja (*wuwei*), dveh ključnih pojmov v daoizmu znotraj njegove lastne tradicije, nato pa bom raziskala možnost vzpostavitve oblike »zelenega daoizma« skozi interpretativno rekonstrukcijo etike *ziran-wuwei*, ki je relevantna za okoljevarstvena in ekološka vprašanja. V prispevku zagovarjam, da pri daoistični ideji *ziran-wuwei* ne gre zgolj za pasivno sprejemanje stvari, temveč bolj za proaktivno dimenzijo, s katero lahko izzovemo agresivnost in destruktivne pristope k eko kozmični enotnosti in različnosti. V prispevku želim pokazati, da čeravno nekatera ekološka vprašanja, ki jih obravnavamo danes, morda niso bila glavna skrb starodavnega daoizma ter da je kompleksnost ekoloških vprašanj in rešitev odvisna od sodobne tehnologije, še vedno lahko črpamo iz daoizma kot kulturnega vira, s pomočjo katerega lahko preučimo mesto človeka v naravi glede na trenutne okoljevarstvene krize.

Ključne besede: daoizem, okoljevarstvena etika, živalska etika, antropocentrizem, *ziran*, *wuwei*

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Environmental ethics is a relatively new discipline within the academic world. There has been much discussion of Daoist thought in the light of environmental or ecological concerns in recent decades. Major publications on related themes include *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (2001) edited by N. J. Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan,¹ *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (2017) by James Miller, and *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* (2020) by Eric S. Nelson. We also find similar studies in the Chinese-speaking world, such as *Huanjing lunlixue: Zhongxi huanbao zhexue bijiao yanjiu* 環境倫理學——中西環保哲學比較研究 (*Environmental Ethics: A Comparative Study of Environmental Philosophy between the Chinese and Western*) (1991) by Feng Huxiang, *Daojiao shengtai lunli yanjiu* 道教生態倫理思想研究 (*A Research into the Thinking of Daoist Ecological Ethics*) (2006) by Jiang Zhaojun, and *Daojiao shengtai sixiang yanjiu* 道教生態思想研究 (*A Study of Daoist Ecology*) (2010) by Chen Xia. Many scholars in both China and abroad regard Daoism as the exemplar *par excellence* of classical Chinese thought on environmental and ecological ethics. All these concerted efforts to bring Daoism into the conversation of the contemporary discourse are significant in terms of looking for a possible convergence in different traditions in the face of the environmental and ecological crisis we are experiencing today. It should be noted, however, that whenever we bring a pre-modern philosophical or religious tradition from the East into conversations about modern and post-modern ethical issues, we need to remind ourselves that the contemporary ethical framework defines, to some extent, the parameters for the application of ethical norms (e.g., environmental and ecological ethics), and thus we should try to avoid superimposing the notion of environmentalism onto an ancient way of thinking, like Daoism. But at the same time, the interpretation of an old philosophical or religious tradition like Daoism should not preclude an attempt to explore its ideas and possible connection to contemporary analogous issues within its own cultural context and form.

In this paper, I will discuss the meanings of *ziran* and *wuwei*, the two key terms in Daoism within its own tradition, and then explore the possibility of establishing a form of “green Daoism” through an interpretative reconstruction of a *ziran-wuwei* ethic that is relevant to environmental or ecological concerns. I will argue that the

1 As ecological concerns were becoming more important in religious circles in the 1990s, this book emerged out of the conference series on “Religion and Ecology” initiated by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard. The discussions in these works are comprehensive, covering a wide spectrum of domains ranging from philosophical Daoism (*Daojia* 道家) represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, to ritual and meditative practices in religious Daoism (*Daojiao* 道教), and from traditional Chinese medicine, Daoist alchemy and dietary practices to Chinese garden designs and measures to protect animals.

Daoist idea of *ziran-wuwei* does not simply mean to accept things passively, but rather it entails a proactive dimension that can be used to challenge aggressiveness and destructive attitudes towards eco-cosmic unity and diversity. The paper intends to show that although some of the ecological issues we address today may not be the major concerns of ancient Daoism, and that the complexity of the ecological problems and solutions are dependent on modern technology, it will not prevent us from taking Daoism as a cultural resource with which we can examine the human place in nature in view of the current environmental crisis.

The Concept of Ziran and its Connection to the Natural World

In the *Daodejing* 道德經 (hereafter, *DDJ*), one of the central themes is expressed through the term *ziran*, which in turn is connected to the central idea of the *dao*. The literal meaning of *ziran* is “arising from itself”, often translated as “self-so”, “what-is-so-of-itself”, or “spontaneously so”.² The Chinese term *ziran* 自然 is a two-character compound of *zi* (自) meaning nose or self and suchness *ran* (然). It is employed to describe the fundamental characteristic of the *dao*. In this context, *ziran* as self-so is in contrast to other-so, denoting the idea that things are allowed to take their own fluid, graceful, peaceful paths without too much external interference. As Chung-ying Cheng has put it, “One important aspect of *tzu-jan* [*ziran*] is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or conditioning by an external power” (Cheng 1986, 356). Yet the concept of *ziran* has always been contentious one clouded by a variety of conflicting interpretations, especially when it is understood as “biological/physical nature” or the “natural world”. Liu Xiaogan, one of the leading Chinese scholars of Daoist philosophy, has paid special attention to the Daoist idea of *ziran*, arguing that *ziran* should not be understood simply as “biological nature” or the “natural world”, but instead refers to a state of “naturalness” characterized by harmony and spontaneity. This status of “naturalness”, according to Liu, indicates the highest value and central principle for the human world (Liu 2009, 67–88).³ The term *ziran* appears five times in the *DDJ*, all of which suggest relevant aspects of the *dao*, meaning self-so (*ziji ruci* 自己如此), usually so (*tongchang ruci* 通常如此), spontaneously so (*zifa ruci* 自發如此) and harmonious (*hexie* 和諧). Let us look at the following chapters in the *DDJ*:

2 The term “self-so” or “what-is-so-of-itself” is used by Arthur Waley, see Waley (1958, 174).

3 Moreover, Liu points out that the term *ziran* as used by Laozi, then by Zhuangzi, and later by Huainanzi, means something rather different in each case.

Human beings model themselves after the Earth;
 The Earth models itself after Heaven;
 Heaven models itself after the *dao*;
 The *dao* models itself after what is self-so (*ziran*). [DDJ, 5]⁴

Of the best of all rulers,
 People will only know that he exists.
 The next best is the one they will love and praise.
 The next is the one they will fear.
 And the worst is the one they will disparage . . .
 When the work is accomplished and the job completed,
 People all say: "We have done it naturally (*ziran*)."
 [DDJ, 17]

Therefore, the ten thousand things honour the *dao*
 and cherish the *de* (virtue)
 The *dao* is honoured and the *de* is cherished without
 anyone's order.
 So, it just happens spontaneously (*ziran*). [DDJ, 51]

To talk little is natural (*ziran*). [DDJ, 23]

Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things
 in their spontaneous order (*ziran*),
 and does not take any action (DDJ, 64)

We should keep in mind that none of the term *ziran* cited above refers directly to the natural world. In fact, the interpretation of the term *ziran* as the "natural world" or the "world of nature" (*ziran jie* 自然界) has only been employed since the 18th century, when it was first introduced by the Japanese scholar Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703–1762), and it was then popularized in Japan in the centuries that followed (Chen Weifen 2010, 104). The term the "natural world" or "great nature" (*daziran* 大自然) was adopted in China in the late 19th century when nature was viewed as a resource to support human existence.⁵ In the DDJ, *ziran* is deeply entwined with the concept of *dao*. While *dao* refers to all things in the universe (*tiandi wanwu* 天地萬物), *ziran* speaks of the primordial state

4 The English translation of the DDJ chapters used in this paper is my own, although I have consulted the translations by Ames and Hall (2003) and John C. H. Wu (2006).

5 Wing Tsin Chan's translation of the line (in the chapter 25 of the DDJ) "Tao models itself after Nature (*ziran*)" is misleading since he takes the modern sense of the term *ziran* (Chan 1969, 153).

of all things. Therefore, the various implications of environmental or ecological significance embedded in *ziran* may not be as inherent or explicit as some environmentalists want to assume.

Nevertheless, we can still ask the question as to whether Laozi prefers the natural, non-human world to the human one. According to Liu Xiaogan, the answer is “no”, as Liu interprets the natural way in the *DDJ* as “humanistic naturalness” (人文自然), because the “natural way”, for Liu, entails a value judgment from a human perspective (Liu 2009, 81). Liu’s argument seems to have a valid point if we look at traditional Chinese art as influenced by Daoist philosophy. Take the Chinese *penjing* 盆景 or potted plants (*Bonsai* 盆栽 in Japanese), for example. This is an art of growing and training miniature trees in small pots, which combines the natural landscape (e.g., small trees or dwarf plants that mimic the shape of the natural world) with the cultivation and modification influenced by a clearly defined human aesthetic vision. Another example is the Chinese rock garden, in which naturally shaped rocks called “artificial mountains” (*jiashan* 假山) are used as decorations for a carefully crafted pavilion. In no other cultural tradition has nature played a more important role in art, music, and literature than in that of China, but in this context natural beauty is often combined with a human touch.⁶ Yet the aesthetic space in Daoism is also regarded as “sacred” space in which humans harmonize with the Earth, Heaven, and the natural environment. In this regard, *ziran* is also perceived as the harmony of cosmic balance (*zhonghe* 中和) and primal energies of nature (*yuanqi* 元氣) that gives life to human beings.

Hans-Georg Moeller takes a different view from Liu, maintaining that Daoist philosophy is completely non-anthropocentric (Moeller 2009, 157). In Moeller’s view, Laozi’s philosophy cautions against the excesses of human civilization, and the same sentiment is also expressed in Zhuangzi’s. For both Laozi and Zhuangzi, human civilization is characterized by a plethora of social ills in the guise of the various lofty values of human culture. According to Moeller’s interpretation, this is the reason why both thinkers advocate a lifestyle without over-culturation (*wen* 文). Obviously, Moeller’s approach to the concept of *ziran* is closer to those holding a primitive position on Daoism. Perhaps, for Moeller, Chinese arts such as potted plants or rock gardens are not purely Daoist in nature, in that they are “polluted” by the aesthetic taste of the Confucian literati.

6 Nevertheless, David L. Hall argues that the aesthetic view of nature held by Daoists can the same time be a kind of ethics. As he says, “Daoist ethics is in fact a sort of aesthetics in which we are ‘enjoined’ to be spontaneous (*ziran*), that is, to act (*wuwei*) in harmony with things ... Such an aesthetic ethics eschews antecedent principles or norms in the same manner that a creative individual would refuse to depend upon past norms for the determination of present actions” (Hall 1987, 110).

Herein lies in the question as to whether *ziran* can be understood as a form of naturalism. Since Daoism emphasizes harmony with the natural and the balanced order of the universe, there has traditionally been a tendency to understand Daoist thought in terms of naturalism. For example, one of Xunzi's critiques of Zhuangzi's Daoism is the latter's naturalist orientation in which the role of humans is ignored for the sake of elevating the role of *tian*. For Xunzi, Zhuangzi's position on the human/nature relationship is wrong because it tends to "neglect the human and lack a proper sense of ethical personhood in maintaining the primacy of an impersonal dehumanizing 'way'" (Nelson 2014, 723). Xunzi thus states,

You glorify nature/*tian* and meditate on her, why not domesticate her and regulate her? You obey nature/*tian* and sing her praises, why not control her course and use it? You look on the seasons with reverence and await them, why not respond to them by seasonal activities? ... To neglect humans and speculate about nature/*tian* is to misunderstand the facts of the universe. (Xunzi 17:13)⁷

Here Xunzi speaks of nature/*tian* in a metaphysical sense, in that nature/*tian* as a cosmic order is marked by the idea of the "production by nature/*tian* and consummation (or construction) by humans" (*tiansheng rencheng* 天生人成) in contrast to Zhuangzi's view of humans being consummated or constructed in the context of the turning of nature/*tian*. The question for us is how to understand this "natural order" implied in Daoism, and its possible connection to environmental concerns. For example, both Benjamin Schwartz and Peter Marshall see Daoism as a "primitive harmonious anarchy" (Schwartz 1985, 210), and Marshall goes further to call this primitive harmonious anarchy a strong foundation for ecological thinking (Marshall 1992, 54).⁸ I think that this connection between the natural order and social anarchism suggested by Schwartz and Marshall may apply more to Zhuangzi rather than Laozi. R. P. Peerenboom, however, holds a different view, insisting that Zhuangzi's nature/*tian* "refuses to privilege nature over humans", maintaining that Zhuangzi argues for "a balance in which neither nature nor man is victor over the other" (Peerenboom 1993, 219).⁹ Peerenboom seems to suggest

7 See the Xunzi 17.13; translation modified from *The Works of Hsun Tzu* (see Dubs 1928, 236).

8 To interpret *ziran* as a social model of "primitive anarchy" is quite different from the explanation given by Liu, who contends that *ziran* is not a concept that is opposed to civilization (see Liu 2009, 70).

9 Peerenboom also points out that Xunzi may have Huang-Lao Daoism in mind when he offers his critique of the Daoist notion of nature/*tian*, since Huang-Lao holds a strong notion of a cosmic order that constitutes normative value. (Peerenboom 1993, 219, 221). Meanwhile, in the Zhuangzi scholarship there is an ongoing debate as to whether *ziran* should be understood as "authenticity" via Guo Xiang's (郭象) interpretation, or "authority" via Heshang Gong's (河上公) (Tadd 2019, 207).

that the notion of “primitive harmonious anarchy” is not helpful to formulate an effective environmental or ecological ethics.¹⁰ Though many environmental or ecological ethicists today tend to be more critical about science and modern technology, this in no way means that they believe in going back to primitivism as a way out of our current crisis.

In response to the Zhuangzi/Xunzi dispute, Eric S. Nelson points out that the difference between the approaches of Zhuangzi and Xunzi does not lie in the argument on the “responsiveness to things”, but “between ethical freedom and moral obligation and their corresponding constructions of the person as according with or imposing upon naturalness” (Nelson 2014, 734). For Nelson, the concept of *ziran* becomes an ethical issue concerning freedom (to keep with one’s inner nature) and obligation (to maintain a disciplined moral cultivation via ritual practices). In addition, Nelson indicates that there is no onto-theological dichotomy in Daoist thought between the natural world and the supernatural or divine world, since Daoism advocates “a more receptive and reverent approach to the myriad thing residing between sky [Heaven] and earth” (Nelson 2009, 296). Nelson then speaks of Daoism in terms of what he calls a “non-reductive naturalistic ethics,” contending that Daoist texts can speak to us “moderns” in terms of ecological concerns (ibid., 294). James Miller holds a similar view when he says that in Daoism “there is no absolute distinction between ‘humans’ and ‘Nature,’ and there is even no absolute distinction between ‘humans’ and ‘gods’ ... To think about Daoism and ecology, then, is to think about how human beings imagine, experience, and act within the natural world” (Miller 2017, 14).

How then should we understand the terms “naturalism”, “naturalistic ethics” or “non-reductive ethical naturalism” in the context of Daoism? In the West naturalism often denotes the belief in a set of orders which operates upon the totality of existing realities in the universe, and that these orders can be discovered in the form of laws of nature through empirical observation and human reasoning. “Naturalistic ethics”, on the other hand, intends to make robust sense of moral objectivity and moral knowledge based on human rationality. Daoism is naturalistic in the sense that there is no assumption of supernatural power as the ultimate authority, particularly in the realm of morality and ethics, as we read “Heaven and Earth are not benevolent (*ren* 仁); they treat the myriad creature as straw dogs” (*DDJ*, 5). Yet neither Laozi nor Zhuangzi hold the view that moral terms, concepts, and properties are ultimately definable in terms of facts about the natural world in terms of human nature and human societies. Their scepticism is stronger

10 In fact, Daoism is often used as a point of reference for a form of “primitivism”, a tradition that speaks for a “negative, backward-looking nihilistic doctrine and not a positive, scientific vision for the future” (Rapp 2012, 29).

than simply saying that moral properties (in the sense that they are open to empirical investigation) are irreducible to non-normative natural properties, nor to normative doctrines.¹¹

Hence, instead of speaking of “primitive harmonious anarchy”, Nelson defines Daoist naturalism as being open to natural phenomena, “without reducing things to a specific doctrine or essence of what constitutes nature or the natural”. Daoist ethics, says Nelson, “signifies its cultivation of life as the lived and unforced performative enactment of responsive freedom” (Nelson 2009, 294). The notion of “performance” or “responsive freedom” raised by Nelson clearly shows his rejection of any essentialist interpretations of the Daoist concept of *ziran*, yet at the same time avoids a “negative” explication in that Daoism is indifferent to anything in the human world. Nelson’s approach, I think, provides an alternative way to understand *ziran* in the light of contemporary environmental and ecological discourse.

Environmental and Ecological Implications of Wuwei

Along with *ziran*, *wuwei* is another highly contested concept in Daoism.¹² Traditionally, when the *DDJ* is read as a political treatise regarding how to maintain a socio-political order, the concept of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action, actionless action, or doing nothing) is understood primarily as the proper function of government with its non-assertive or non-coercive action in practice.¹³ In the *DDJ*, we clearly see Laozi’s disapproval of any aggressive policies such as war, cruel punishment and heavy taxation which, according to Laozi, express a ruler’s own desire for wealth and power. Therefore, we read the Daoist ideal of governing without governing in the *DDJ* as follows:

The *dao* does not do anything (*wuwei*),
yet it leaves nothing undone (*wubuwei*).
If a ruler can cling it,
All things will be self-transforming (*zihua*).
...

11 The term *wuwei* or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism and Legalism.

12 The term *wuwei* or non-action is used mostly in Daoist texts, but the concept is discussed broadly in many schools of Chinese philosophy, such as Confucianism and Legalism.

13 As Herrlee G. Creel has pointed out, there are twelve occurrences of *wuwei* in the *DDJ*, and at least six of them are clearly concerned with the technique of government (Creel 1970, 54).

In not desiring, they would be at peace.
and the world would be self-ordering (*zizheng*). [*DDJ*, 37] ¹⁴

Do you think you can take over the universe
and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.
The world is a sacred vessel,
You cannot control it.
The person who tries to act upon it will ruin it.
The person who tries to hold it will lose it. (*DDJ*, 29)

Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things
in their spontaneous order (*ziran*),
and does not take any action. (*DDJ*, 64)

In Daoist political philosophy, self-transforming (*zihua* 自化) and self-ordering (*zizheng* 自政) are derived from the key concept of *wuwei*, denoting that the people can do better without the interference of the state. Similar terms such as self-simplicity (*zipu* 自樸) and self-prosperity (*zifu* 自富) are employed in the *DDJ* to express the same idea that Daoist spontaneous action facilitates the self-transformation of the people.¹⁵ Following this account, some contemporary scholars interpret *wuwei* as a political call for minimal government or a *laissez-faire* policy.¹⁶ The claim of “not taking any action” (*bukan wei* 不敢為) means not taking the action according to what has been planned or designed. According to the *DDJ*, people try to “take actions to make something happen in the world by their own reasoning, plans, and contrivances”, which, however, often turn out to be disastrous. This idea is also expressed through the metaphor of governing the state “like cooking a small fish” in the *DDJ*.

Beyond political interpretations, there is also a broad spectrum of understanding *wuwei* in the Daoist scholarship.¹⁷ When *wuwei* is rendered as “acting naturally”,

14 It should be noted that according to the Mawangdui edition, chapter 37 is the final chapter of the entire *DDJ*, and thus is a kind of concluding chapter.

15 According to Philip J. Ivanhoe, the Daoist ideal of a sage-ruler is more “centripetal”, allowing more freedom for people to find the *dao* in their own ways. It follows that a political leader following the Confucian model is one who draws people “upward” through the excellence of his moral charisma “like a polar star” (Ivanhoe 2011, 38)

16 David Boaz, the Vice President of Cato Institute, identifies Laozi as the “first known libertarian” of the East in his book *Libertarianism: A primer* (Boaz 1998).

17 There are different focuses on the meanings of *wuwei*, such as an action that does not go against “the grain of nature” (Needham 1956), an action that is in accordance with one’s inherent self-nature (Fung 1984), an action that goes with the flow (Fox 1996), and an action that is characterized

it gives rise to a debate in terms of what “being natural” means here. Ronnie Littlejohn sees “being natural” as “effortless action”, and a *wuwei* action as being “free from the tangles we have created for ourselves by the institutions, rules, and distinctions that clutter our minds and generate tension in our life together” (Littlejohn 2009, 18). Edward Slingerland approaches *wuwei* as a behaviour in comparison with *wuyiwei* 無以為, or action as cognitive “no-regarding”. The basic idea of no-regarding is to avoid contriving to do anything for utilitarian gain (Slingerland 2003, 89). In fact, both Littlejohn and Slingerland attempt to understand *wuwei* in the light of a Daoist form of action-guiding consideration that directs us towards an alternative way of living with things. When we read chapter 38 in the *DDJ* we can see how *wuwei* is associated with *wuyiwei*, i.e., a Daoist non-utilitarian position with no projected expectations. The paradoxical claim of “not doing anything” and “leaving nothing undone” signifies what Laozi calls the “power” or “virtuosity” (*de* 德) of the *dao*. The effectiveness of the result is a by-product instead of a premeditated aim prior to action.¹⁸ In this regard, *wuwei* emphasizes the mode of action rather than the content of action.

This non-utilitarian position maintained by Daoists is elucidated more explicitly in the *Zhuangzi*, where the idea of *wuwei* is presented through Zhuangzi’s argument on uselessness (*wuyong* 無用). According to Zhuangzi, we can live a life that is happier and more fulfilled if we become more “useless”, that is, our life is not confined to the *status quo* or the social convention that makes a distinction between usefulness and uselessness. To illustrate this point, Zhuangzi shows us the use of a useless tree:

Now you have this big tree and you’re distressed because it’s useless. Why don’t you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? (Zhuangzi, 1; Watson 1968, 35)

By elucidating usefulness in uselessness (*wuyong zhi yong* 無用之用), Zhuangzi recommends that we adopt a different perspective to look at things in their own terms. This notion of discovering the place and function of each thing is also articulated in the *DDJ*, wherein lies the following Daoist critique of the conventional way of thinking:

by responsive participation (Nelson 2009).

18 The concept of *wuwei* is also interpreted as “skilful” action or “flow action” which denotes the execution of particular skilfulness, such as the stories of Cook Ding and Wheelwright Bian in the *Zhuangzi*.

When something is bent, then it is can be put straight;
 When someone is wronged, then one is ready to be redressed;
 When a container is empty, then it can be filled;
 When something is worn out, then it is can made new;
 When something is few then it can get more;
 When something is many, then it can become confused. (DDJ, 22)

Martin Heidegger, who was intrigued by the Daoist idea of the useless, states, “One need not worry about the useless [*das Nutzlose*]. By virtue of its uselessness the inviable and everlasting suit it. Thus, it is wrong to apply the standard of usefulness [*Nützlichkeit*] to the useless” (Heidegger 1998, 131).¹⁹ It is interesting that Heidegger speaks of the question of uselessness in his discussion of traditional language and technological language, claiming that “being useless in such a way that they [things in the natural world] let nothing make them immediately practical” (Van Brakel 2014, 391). There is an implicit non-anthropocentric approach to nature in Heidegger’s argument with regard to uselessness. His notion of “letting be” (*Gelassenheit*), to a certain extent, resembles the Daoist idea of *wuwei*. This attitude of non-interfering action with regard to natural forces may serve to inhibit positive human adjustment to foundational environmental disruption.

Nevertheless, Peerenboom points out that to understand *wuwei* as “acting naturally” is unhelpful to the would-be Daoist environmental ethicist. To avoid the ambiguity implied in the expression “acting naturally” (Peerenboom 1991, 3), Nelson interprets *wuwei* as “responsive participation” (Nelson 2009, 299) which, in comparison to non-action or doing nothing, incorporates a more positive and proactive dimension of the term. Nelson also uses the idea of responsiveness to interpret Zhuangzi’s *ziran* as both the spontaneity of nature and responsiveness to nature (ibid., 306). In doing so, Nelson avoids the over-passivity implied in the understanding of *ziran* and *wuwei* as simply “following the flow”, despite *wuwei* in its negative sense suggesting a form of human actions that is devoid of excessive intervention in order to preserve the natural flow of things. In his article “Chinese Traditional Thought and Practice: Lessons for an Ecological Economics Worldview”, T. N. Jenkins insists that the Daoist core principles of *ziran* and *wuwei* provide us with guidelines for an environmental ethic:

19 This quotation from Heidegger is taken from Van Brakel (2014, 390). Heidegger opposes the view that technology is “a means to an end” and “a human activity”. These two approaches, says Heidegger, are the “instrumental” and “anthropological”, respectively. We see a similar argument in Zhuangzi’s idea of uselessness.

Together, *ziran* and *wuwei* provide appreciation of the need for humanity to understand, identify with, and yield to, natural rhythms and processes, and encourage the harmonious use of senses and technologies, rather than the imposition of form or moral judgement upon life's processes, in order that humanity maintains a "consciousness of participation" in the cosmos. ... For Daoism, the natural world is not an external utilitarian resource to be controlled and exploited, but a dynamic process within which harmonization is a liberating abstraction from the competitive striving of everyday human existence. (Jenkins 2002, 42–43)²⁰

Jenkins' argument corresponds to Zhuangzi's critique of an anthropocentric notion of usefulness and Heidegger's argument on the use of technologies. Along the same line of thinking, James Miller pushes the concept of *wuwei* further by speaking of the Daoist mode of agency which, according to Miller, can best be understood by the term "transaction" rather than "action" or "non-action" (Miller 2017, 41). As he argues,

Daoism proposes a radical reversal of the way that modern human beings think about the natural world. Rather than understanding human beings as "subjects" who observe the "objective" world of nature, Daoism proposes that subjectivity is grounded in the Dao itself, the wellspring of cosmic creativity for a world of constant transformation. (Miller 2017, 26)

The reversal of the dualistic structure of subjectivity and objectivity indicated by Miller reminds us of the well-known story in the *Zhuangzi*, when Zhuangzi asks if it is Zhuangzi who was dreaming of the butterfly or the butterfly who was dreaming of Zhuangzi. The question raised by Zhuangzi goes beyond the sceptical view of reality *versus* dreams. Instead, it challenges humanity's objectification of the "other" (e.g., animals and nature). The notion of a "transaction" as such dismantles the conventional twofold element in a cognitive process, i.e., the distinction in terms of the duality between the agent/subjective and the patient/objective. According to Miller, the Daoist notion of the agency of nature allows nature and human beings to interact and respond to one another creatively, or as he puts it: "Humans do not stand out from the natural world because of their subjectivity; their subjectivity is precisely derived from or modelled on 'nature' because Dao in itself is subjectivity" (ibid., 33). This mode of transaction rather than subjective action over an objective world can be inspirational for environmental ethics when we reconsider the place of nature, non-human beings, and humans' relationship to them.

20 There is a minor modification of the romanization of the Chinese terms here for the sake of consistency.

Animals: Beyond Animalistic Metaphors

Animal ethics and environmental ethics are often perceived as convergent fields of philosophical inquiry. Among non-human life, animals are an important part of the ecological system. In terms of referencing animals in Daoist texts, we cannot discuss animals from the view of Daoism without mentioning the *Zhuangzi*. In contrast to Laozi's *DDJ*, where animals are seldom mentioned, the *Zhuangzi* is full of various kinds of animals who play crucial roles in solidifying Zhuangzi's Daoist philosophy. For example, in the *Xiaoyao you* 逍遙游 ("A Free and Easy Wondering"), the opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, we find the image of the big bird Peng who has transformed from a fish to a bird, followed by other little creatures such as cicadas, doves, quails and moles. All the animals described in the chapter play a key role in explaining the idea of *xiaoyao* 逍遙, i.e., a condition of complete freedom and ease. Here is another interesting passage from the *Zhuangzi*:

Moreover, I have heard that in ancient times the birds and beasts were many and the people few. Therefore, the people all nested in the trees in order to escape danger, during the day gathering acorns and chestnuts, at sundown climbing back up to sleep in their trees. Hence they were called the people of the nest-builder. In ancient times people knew nothing about wearing clothes. In summer they heaped up great piles of firewood, in winter they burned them to keep warm. Hence, they were called "the people who know how to stay alive". In the age of Shen Nong, the people lay down peacefully and easily, woke up wide-eyed and blank. They knew their mothers but not their fathers and lived side by side with the elk and the deer. They ploughed for their food, wove for their clothing, and had no thought in their hearts of harming one another. This was Perfect Virtue at its height! (*Zhuangzi*, 29)²¹

The passage given above is said by Robber Zhi, who presents a Daoist utopia of living in a harmonious, stateless society. In this ideal society there are more birds and beasts than humans, and people live peacefully and happily with the elk and the deer. Does it mean that Zhuangzi prefers an animal kingdom to the human world, or that he ignores *the role of humans for the sake of elevating the role of nature and non-human world*, as in Xunzi's critique? I do not think so. Most of the animal images in the *Zhuangzi* are employed as metaphors as a rhetorical method to illustrate Zhuangzi's philosophical point, such as the dreaming

21 All citations of the *Zhuangzi* in this paper are from Watson's translation, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (1968), although some minor changes are made for consistency.

butterfly, the happy fish in the river, and the happy turtle in the mud.²² In fact, the utopia passage cited above is a parody of the Confucian notion of virtue. Moeller makes a similar point when he notes that Zhuangzi's depictions of animals and other non-human figures are often used ironically to mock humans:

... animals live how they live without claiming to know how to live. They never engage in arguments about the respective merits of their food or habitat, they never try to convince other animals to change their diet in accordance with any "eating ideology", and they also never skeptically question if the partners they mate with are really right for them. Humans, on the other hand, tend towards an "anthropocentric epistemology" and replace the art of living with the dubious art of "knowing how to live"—which may then threaten social harmony since it easily leads to "relativist" conflicts or skeptical indecision. (Moeller 2015, 105)

Apart from using animal metaphors to mock humans, Zhuangzi also takes animals as models to imitate. Instead of using zoomorphism or human qualities to describe animals, Zhuangzi does the opposite by offering a critique of the human tendency to harm animals (either intentionally or unintentionally) through domestication and instrumentalism. Let us look at three examples given by Zhuangzi:

Example 1: The Marquis of Lu is a bird lover. He treats a seabird to wine, meat, and music, and he does so with good intentions. Yet his treatment of the bird leads to the end of the bird's life. (*Zhuangzi* 18)

Example 2: Bo Le, a skilful horse tamer, brands horses, clips their hair, pares their hooves, halters their heads, bridles and hobbles them, confines them in stables, subjects them to hunger and thirst, gallops and races them, worries them with the bondage of bit and breastplate, and threatens them with a whip and switch. (*Zhuangzi* 9)

Example 3: Jixingzi, a trainer for fighting roosters, is asked to train a fighting rooster for a king. After he completes the training, the rooster refuses to fight and all the other ordinary roosters avoid him. Because the idea of the "fighting rooster" is a human construct, the training distorts the rooster's natural condition. (*Zhuangzi* 19)

22 Paul D'Ambrosio also makes a similar observation, pointing out that animals and non-human characters in the *Zhuangzi* are mainly allegorical or metaphorical, "allowing the *Zhuangzi* to make broadly applicable arguments". He also contends that "the primary philosophical significance of animals and non-humans in the *Zhuangzi* has to do with creating critical distance for philosophical reflection" (see D'Ambrosio 2021, 1–18).

In the first two examples, the human “kindness” to the seabird and horse is nothing but “our (human) experiences of others (animals)” that reduce their “otherness” to the human “sameness”. By so doing, humans fail to acknowledge the innate nature of animals, and thus violate the Daoist principle of *ziran*, i.e., spontaneity and self-so-ness. This is the reason Zhuangzi makes a distinction in the first example between “treating the bird like oneself” (*yiji yangniao* 以己養鳥) and “treating the bird like a bird” (*yiniaio yangniao* 以鳥養鳥). The example of the fighting rooster shows the problem when animals are trained to serve human needs. The story also implies that once we align ourselves with nature we would become perfectly unfettered and free. Therefore, Zhuangzi tells us,

He who holds to True Rightness does not lose the original form of his inborn nature. So, for him joined things are not webbed toes, things forking off are not superfluous fingers, the long is never too much, the short is never too little. The duck’s legs are short, but to stretch them out would worry him; the crane’s legs are long, but to cut them down would make him sad. What is long by nature needs no cutting off; what is short by nature needs no stretching. That would be no way to get rid of worry. I wonder, then, if benevolence and righteousness are part of man’s true form? Those benevolent men—how much worrying they do! (Zhuangzi 8)

Again, the animal metaphors (i.e., the legs of the duck and the crane) used in the passage is a rhetorical means to challenge the conventional norms that distort the true form or authenticity (*zhen* 真) of the individual person. Nevertheless, the concept of *ziran* as self-so also applies to Zhuangzi’s view on animals as well as the actualization of *ziran* in the non-human world through human’s practice of *wuwei* as an action without being subjected to the desires of human beings.

Apart from the *Zhuangzi*, animal metaphors are extensively employed in religious Daoism. Thus, the place of animals, both actual and imagined, is special, as we see in the “Four Mystical Symbols of the East” (*dongfang siling* 東方四靈), namely, the Blue Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermillion Bird, and the Red Black Tortoise. These four animals are respected since they are perceived as sacred. Meanwhile, specific animals are protected because they are used for farming (*renyong zhe* 任用者) or they are babies (*shaochi zhe* 少齒者) as indicated in *The Scripture on the Great Peace* (*Taipingjing* 太平經), one of the key texts on early Daoist thought.²³ The Daoist vision with environmental/ecological implications also appears in various forms of the Daoist description of “grotto heavens and blessed lands” (*dongtian fudi* 洞天福地). According to religious

23 See Wang (2014, 582). For the English translation of the *Taipingjing*, see Hendrichske (2015).

Daoism, these places are transcendent realms of immortals, remote and hidden from the real world. Special self-cultivation is required to find those spectacular locations full of beautiful yet mystical mountains, rivers, plants, and animals. For Daoists, the mystery of the grotto does not suggest merely a geographical location, a “blessed land” that represents the wonderland that human beings can reach in life, but more importantly, a state of the mind in religious cultivation that enables one to reach the realm of immortality. Grotto heavens and blessed lands are an important part of the Daoist worldview about the balance of nature and society, and a belief in immortality. These places represent the embodiment of the concept harmony between humans and nature. However, to translate such ideas into environmentalism requires reconstructive work, especially if we look for a tradition which honours “holistic integration, interrelatedness, embodiment, caring, and love” (Tucker and Grim 1994, 187).

In adhering to Daoist practices related to actual animals, which include dietary regulations and medical practices, early Daoists did not adopt vegetarianism except for special occasions, such as during religious rituals or meditative practice. Even when vegetarianism is practiced, the precept of being vegetarian has little to do with animal welfare, and instead is done for the sake of human health and longevity.²⁴ Meanwhile, animal tissues combined with medical herbs are often used in the formulas of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), such as tiger bones, antelope, buffalo or rhino horns, deer antlers, the testicles and other parts of black bears, and snake bile. Even though modern Western medicines and remedies also contain animal and plant derivatives, such usage is not as broad as we see in TCM.²⁵ The practice of TCM is intrinsically connected to Daoist alchemy, in which the vital human organs are perceived as embodied animal spirits. For example, the white tiger for the lung, the vermilion bird for the heart, the dragon for the liver, the phoenix for the spleen, and the deer for kidney. It follows that the Daoist conception of animal spirits as resident in the vital organs is also part of TCM. We may say here that Daoism gives animals or animal spirits a special position, but this position is not completely non-anthropocentric. After the 12th century, due to the influence of Buddhism, some sects of Daoism, the *Quanzhen Dao* 全真道 (the Dao of the Complete Authenticity), for example, made vegetarianism part of their monastic order, and the notion of not harming animals become

24 As Nikolas Broy (2019, 39) points out, in contrast to the strict vegetarian practices that developed under Buddhist influence, fasting (*zhai* 齋 or *ji* 齋) served as a means of purification that was limited to specific occasions.

25 Since 1990s, the Chinese government has banned the domestic trade in various animal tissues such as tiger bones and deer antlers, and the use of animal parts in TCM has been evolving in recent decades.

part of the broader Daoist vegetarian practice.²⁶ However, to say Daoism provides a universalistic ethic of not killing that extends “not only to all humanity, but to the wider domain of all living things” (Kirkland 2001, 284), is not entirely true if we talk about Daoism before the influence of Buddhism.

Another reason for animals having occupied a central position in Daoism is that animal movements are often taken as models to imitate by humans, ranging from martial arts to sexual practices, known as the “art of the bedchamber” (*fangzhong-shu* 房中術), both of which are perceived as integral part of “inner alchemy”.²⁷ Animals have a special place in religious Daoism, for humans may observe them for guidance. For example, this idea of emulating animals is shown in the Daoist texts excavated in Mawangdui. As Anderson and Raphals point out, these

present us with an equally early, and much friendlier, view of animals: the use of animal movements as metaphors to describe whole-body movements that do not otherwise lend themselves to clear descriptions. The same kinds of metaphors appear in the later literature of Daoist-inspired martial arts, where the modes of movement of cranes, mantises, and other creatures are taken as models for defense and attacks of martial artists. (Anderson and Raphals 2006, 182)

Generally speaking, animals in Daoism are presented in three ways: 1) as metaphors to critique human society; 2) as metaphors to illustrate the Daoist philosophy of difference; and 3) as potential teachers of human beings as part of lessons learned from close observation of the non-human world.²⁸ It should be noted, however, that compared with Buddhism, Daoism in general has a weaker notion of the need for animal protection in the sense understood by contemporary ecological discourse. In most cases, animals are used in food, medicine, and meditation for the purpose of attaining health and longevity.²⁹ After all, religious Daoism has

26 The *Quanzhen Dao* is a syncretic school in which we find a blending of elements drawn from Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Another Buddhist influence, apart from vegetarianism, can be seen in the adoption of celibacy, which was not encouraged in early Daoism. According to Nikolas Broy’s research on vegetarian practices in early Chinese religion, vegetarianism “was never a stand-alone norm in Chinese society but it was always clustered with similar moral values such as chastity, sobriety, and simplicity” (Broy 2019, 57).

27 For example, the *Classic of the White Girl* (*Sunu jing* 素女經), one of the earliest classics on Daoist sexology, introduces nine postures for sex, and all these are named after animals and animal postures.

28 For more discussion on this topic, see the article “The Great Unity: Daoism, Nonhuman Animals, and Human Ethics” by Louis Komjathy (2009, 63–83)

29 Therefore, the view that one of the ways to “undercut anthropocentrism” in Zhuangzi’s Daoism is “through entertaining the perspectives of a wide variety of fauna” (Parkes 1983, 237) has a valid point, but it does not represent the whole picture of the Daoist position on animals.

its own concerns that are distinctive from contemporary environmental and ecological discourses. For instance, the current discourse on “animal rights” is based on moral principles grounded in the belief that non-human animals deserve the ability to live as they wish, without being subjected to the desires of human beings. A philosophically viable animal ethics can be established in the philosophy of Zhuangzi, but the concept of “animal rights” which is derived from the concept of “human rights” is totally absent in Daoist thought, as Paul R. Godin points out:

The Zhuangzi does not quite reach the concept of ecology itself, because the text does not consider what might happen if there is an artificial disturbance in the equilibrium between predators and prey. ...The Zhuangzi views the natural world as a single and constant system, essentially static, in which various species feed off each other in order to survive. (Goldin 2005, 81)

Godin speaks of the limits of Daoist thought in terms of its potential ecological significance, particularly its view of animals. I am sympathetic to Godin's observation in certain important respects. Nevertheless, Zhuangzi's position on the domain of non-humans is still relevant if we talk about the need for humans to keep our hands off the processes at work in the natural world whenever possible.

A Ziran-Wuwei Ethic: An Integrated Reflection

In recent decades, Daoism has attracted much interested from environmental and ecological ethicists in the search for a “greener” worldview outside the Western tradition. Nevertheless, this effort has met a certain degree of challenge for some scholars are sceptical about the viability of Daoism in terms of its ecological implications, as well as its influence on environmental ethics in China today (Nelson 2009, 294–316). The question here is if Daoism is environmentally friendly by default, or if the Daoist body can be as seen as a “political ecology” (envisioned by Miller) given that Daoism is more cosmocentric and less anthropocentric in comparison with many other philosophical and religious traditions. I think that a *ziran-wuwei* ethic can be deployed, at least at the theoretical level, to support an ecological position such as protecting the environment, the biosphere and biodiversity.³⁰

30 Here, I concur with Nelson's view, “The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are not relevant to environmental issues by contributing specific scientific research, political policies, or activist initiatives. It would be anachronistic to have such expectations of ancient texts” (Nelson 2009, 294–316).

The *ziran-wuwei* ethic of Daoism entails both diagnostic and potentially therapeutic dimensions. Current forms of environmental conservationism with their emphasis on the protection of biological life and ecosystems would benefit greatly from the Daoist-inspired notion of cosmic interconnectedness and harmony in terms of thinking about how human beings should experience and act within the natural world. Today's environmental degradation, from a Daoist perspective, is led by our failure to acknowledge humans' relation to nature's ecological integrity, which includes plants, insects, animals, as well as mountains and rivers, or in more Daoist terms, the unity of the human body and the cosmic body. With regard to the potential therapeutic implications, the *ziran-wuwei* ethic of Daoism calls for a proactive way of environmental conservationism and cultural transformation. That is, we need to adapt a way of life that avoids disturbing the natural balance of the world simply for short-term benefits, as we have seen in past three decades in China when the government focused only on economic development. This new conservationist effort should be encouraged both at the personal and state levels to curb the unsustainable pattern of economic development. As it is said in the *DDJ*:

Thus you use your person to survey other persons,
Your family to survey other families,
Your village to survey other villages,
Your state to survey other states,
and your world to survey worlds past and yet to come. (*DDJ*, 54)

Kristofer Schipper, one of the Daoist scholars who focuses his studies on the Daoist's vision of the environment, contends that in Daoism, "the idea of responsibility of the king towards his country is extended to the responsibility of each person towards his environment. ...He is no longer simply the product of his environment, but dominates and transforms it" (Schipper 1994, 103). Schipper's notion of "transformation" corresponds to Nelson's idea of "responsive participation" in the sense that *ziran-wuwei* does not mean simply doing nothing, but acting in the manner of "assisting all things" (*fu wanwu* 輔萬物) to grow in the way as they are, as indicated in chapter 64 of the *DDJ*: "Thus, the sage-ruler supports all things in their spontaneous order (*ziran*).” In the words of Zhuangzi, the *wuwei* action is not the one based on an instrumentalist and desire-based existential mode, but the one that is in attunement with the *dao*. This position is in agreement with environmentalists today who promote a green lifestyle to oppose destructive human behaviours and support the preservation and nurturing of life on Earth.

Regarding the practice of Daoist-inspired environmentalism in China today, one example is the work done by the Chinese Daoist Association 中國道教協會 (CDA), which has been advocating a vision of organic unity and sustainable development. The CDA speaks of Daoism as a “green religion”, and Daoist monks as leaders of a new green movement. The CDA also regards itself as a bridge between the Daoist religion and the government, in order to increase Daoism’s visibility and influence on efforts at changing the environmental and ecological situation in China.³¹ In 1995, the CDA issued a declaration of its commitment to environmentalism:

We shall spread the ecological teachings of Daoism, lead all Daoist followers to abide in the teachings of self-so or non-action, observe the injunction against killing for amusement, preserve and protect the harmonious relationship of all things with nature, establish paradises of immortals on Earth, and pursue the practice of our beliefs ... We will raise awareness regarding ecology among various social groups, resist the human exploitation of nature and the abuse of natural environments, protect the Earth upon which human survival depends, and generally make the world a better place for humans to inhabit. (Zhang 2001, 370)

Meanwhile, by building a network of “ecological temples”, Daoist monks are serving as role models for promoting waste management and energy efficiency at all temples and pilgrim sites. For example, at Maoshan 茅山, one of the largest Daoist temples in China, tourists can see solar lights line the broad walkways instead of utility poles or power lines. In order to educate the public, Daoist monks offer seminars at temples to promote the Daoist idea of cosmic harmony.

In addition, the Daoist green thinking qua the *ziran-wuwei* ethic is expressed through the concepts of simplicity and frugality, which may be both directly and indirectly supportive of environmentalism. The concepts of simplicity and frugality can also be understood as a proactive means for sustainable development. Laozi tells us that society would be better off if people could “manifest plainness and embrace simplicity” and “lessen selfishness and reduce desires.” (DDJ, 19). The Chinese word *pu* 樸 here literally means “an uncarved block” (a symbol for untainted natural state), referring to the ideas of both “simplicity” and “authenticity”. It is also a metaphor for a state of accord with the spontaneous (*ziran*)

31 The CDC is a state-sponsored national association responsible for overseeing the management of all Daoist orders and temples. Its active promotion of Daoism as a “green religion” offers an example how Daoism can be engaged in the global effort to protect environment. As Zhang Jiyu points out, “Daoists in China have diligently worked toward disseminating Daoist teachings and maintaining the famous Daoist mountains and hermitages, planting trees and cultivating forests, and protecting the natural environment” (Zhang 2001, 361–72).

unfolding of the process of nature. For Daoists, simplicity affords a person an existence that is more in tune with nature and oneself. However, Laozi does not advocate any ascetic practice in terms of getting rid of all desires; instead, he criticizes the problem of excessiveness that prevents one from remaining in harmony with one's natural state and that of one's environment. Therefore, we read,

No wrong is greater than having objects to crave for.
 No disaster is greater than not knowing one's true needs.
 No greater ill is invited than by craving to possess.
 Thus, the satisfaction from knowing one's true needs
 and not asking for more is eternal. (*DDJ*, 46)

What Laozi says reminds us of one of today's biggest problems—consumerism. Modern society is marked by increasing commodification and consumerism, termed “a culture of excess” by Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher and cultural theorist. Consumerism is a pattern of behaviour characterized by the frivolous collecting of products which turns into a process of seduction and stimulation.³² For example, clothing today has changed from function to image (i.e., fashion), which shapes a person's self-identity. As a result, a person may have lost the sense of who they are, since self-identity is replaced by the brand name of a product in a consumer age of information and mass media. Such a behaviour of frivolously collecting products has a significant impact on environmental sustainability. Environmentalists see consumerism as a great threat to environmental sustainability, because it emphasizes the accumulation and consumption of material resources. This is the reason why Laozi claims that “No wrong is greater than having objects to crave for; No disaster is greater than not knowing one's true needs.” (*DDJ*, 46) According to Laozi, the *dao* of *wuwei* not only prevents self-centeredness and self-gratification of the people, but also allows for their utmost simplicity and authenticity. As such, the *DDJ* proposes that excessive desires are to be overcome by maximizing inner peace and contentment through the tranquillity of the mind. This notion of tranquillity of the mind is intrinsically connected to the Daoist idea of “nourishing life”.

The concept of “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生) has two dimensions in the Daoist tradition: the nourishment of human life and the nourishment of all living things in the world. According to Fung Yu-lan, one of the most eminent Chinese philosophers of the 20th century, the original concern of philosophical Daoism is “how to preserve life and avoid harm and danger in the human world” (Fung 1984, 99), and as we read in the *DDJ*: “It [the *dao*] gives life and nurtures them” (*DDJ*, 10).

32 See Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* (1999) for a detailed discussion of this.

For Laozi, life is more valuable than material things, and thus he asks: "As for your name and your body, which is dearer? As for your body and your wealth, which is more to be prized?" (*DDJ*, 44). Therefore, the *DDJ* speaks of preserving life, observing life, cultivating life, and respecting life. Religious Daoism focuses on various self-cultivation practices (such as meditation, breathing exercises, dietary restrictions, and sexual techniques) aimed at enhancing health and longevity. For Zhuangzi, the concept of "nourishing life" is expressed through "nourishing innate nature" (*yangxing* 養性) and "nourishing heart-mind" (*yangxin* 養心). For example, there is a dialogue on nourishing life between Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor and Guang Chengzi, a Daoist immortal. When Huangdi asks what he should do to rule his body and attain a long life, Guang Chengzi replies:

Let there be no seeing, no hearing; enfold the spirit in quietude and the body will right itself. Be still, be pure, do not labour your body, do not churn up your essence, and then you can live a long life. (Zhuangzi, 11)

For Zhuangzi, we should not only cultivate our bodies but also our minds and innate natures. In the chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, entitled "The Secret of Nourishing Life", Zhuangzi uses the story of a cook who is skilful in cutting up an ox to illustrate how we should cultivate our natural strengths and skills by casting aside our ego-centric selves, so we can lead simple and natural, but complete and flourishing lives.

Meanwhile, the concept of "nourishing life" indicates the nourishment of all living things in the world. This notion of "nourishing life" can be extended to environmental and ecological thinking. In this regard, Nelson's interpretation of *yangsheng* as "non-purposive nurturing of life" in contrast to the artificiality of "purposive practices" is helpful to embrace a broader meaning of the Daoist notion of the nourishment of life based on a *ziran-wuwei* ethic. The idea of "non-purposive nurturing of life" is in accord with Nelson's elucidation of "responsive participation" as a *wuwei* action. The idea of "responsiveness" (*ying* 應) requires appropriate actions in certain specific situations as well as recognizing the transformative operation of things in the world in the ways that they are. A *ziran-wuwei* ethic, therefore, calls on us to act naturally, creatively, and in harmony with the natural world. This "responsive participation", for Nelson, is a way for us to rediscover "the human" in recognizing its embodied situatedness within "the inhuman" or "natural" (Nelson 2014, 726).

In sum, through the explication of the Daoist notions of *ziran* and *wuwei*, in this paper I intend to show how ancient Daoism can be brought into the contemporary discourse of environmental or ecological ethics. It is my contention that a *ziran-wuwei* ethic does not suggest a form of romanticized primitivism, a life of

the “noble salvage”, nor does it offer a way of thinking that is “environmental” or “ecological” by default. Meanwhile, in order to solve certain specific environmental issues we face today, such as air pollution and climate change, we need more research and development of conservation materials and methods in fields related to biochemistry and biophysics under the eco-technological principle.³³ Nevertheless, Daoism can be reconstructed as a wake-up call and an ethical framework to accommodate our reflection upon the human relation with the natural world in the face of an environmental crisis caused by an over-emphasis on human achievement and domination over nature.

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33 The eco-technological principle here means using technologies that favour the environment’s well-being, which then in turn favour our wellbeing. For more a detailed discussion on technology and environmental ethics, see Epting (2010, 18–26).

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The Biopolitics of Nourishing Life: Daoism as Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that nourishing life (*yangsheng* 養生) as a self-cultivating practice stands as an alternative model of biopolitics that challenges the neoliberal one. Existing scholarship on nourishing life focuses much on its ethical significance, for instance, as an effective way to lead a long life, whereas Nelson's most recent monograph *Daoism as Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* provides new insights into the socio-political aspect of it, in terms of an ecological way of government. However, Nelson's discussion of biopolitics rarely engages with the Seven Sages in the Bamboo Forest (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢) that nonetheless practice nourishing life themselves, as an art of living and a political strategy. Focused on nourishing life in Ji Kang as one of the Sages, I situate my position against Jullien's claim that the self-cultivating sage is uncritical due to his incapacity to think of conflict in the face of power. And in the context of his book I also highlight Heubel's negligence of the neoliberal political economy underlying Foucauldian biopolitics in the context of his intercultural study of nourishing life as a possible model of biopolitics. As such, based on Nelson's consideration of the non-coercive *ethos* and *praxis* of Dao, I propose a biopolitics of nourishing life as opposed to the neoliberal "environmental technology" that normalizes materialist lifestyle and attitudes, the production of freedom as commodity.

Keywords: biopolitics, nourishing life, neoliberalism, environment, technology of the self

Biopolitika negovanja življenja: daoizem kot okoljska filozofija

Izveleček

V tem članku zagovarjam stališče, da se nega življenja (*yangsheng* 養生) kot praksa samokultivacije vzpostavlja kot alternativni model biopolitike, ki izziva neoliberalni model. Obstoječe študije se v tem kontekstu osredotočajo na etični pomen nege življenja kot učinkovit način podaljševanja življenja. A najnovejša monografija Erica Nelsona *Daoism as Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* ponuja nove vpoglede v družbenopolitični vidik te problematike, in sicer kot ekološki način vladanja. Vendar Nelsonova razprava o biopolitiki redko omenja Sedem modrecev iz bambusovega gaja (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢), ki se sami ukvarjajo s hranjenjem življenja kot obojim, umetnostjo življenja in

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politično strategijo. Osredotočena na hranjenje življenja v Ji Kangu kot enem od teh modrecev, kritiziram Jullienovo trditev, da modrec, ki izvaja samokultivacijo, ni kritičen, ker v soočanju z močjo in oblastjo ni zmožen kritičnega razmišljanja. Izpostavim tudi Heublovo kritiko neoliberalne politične ekonomije, ki je v ozadju foucaultovske biopolitike in predstavlja del njegove medkulturne študije hranjenja življenja kot možnega modela biopolitike. Naposled na osnovi Nelsonovega razmišljanja o svobodni etiki in praksi Daota predlagam takšno biopolitiko hranjenja življenja, ki je v nasprotju z neoliberalno »okoljsko tehnologijo«, saj slednja normalizira materialistični življenjski slog in odnose ter proizvaja svobodo kot vrsto blaga.

Ključne besede: biopolitika, negovanje življenja, neoliberalizem, okolje, tehnologija, sebstva

Introduction: Nourishing Life and Biopolitics

Most scholarship on Daoist nourishing life (*yangsheng* 養生) emphasizes its ethical value as a way of cultivating life or accomplishing wisdom over its socio-political significance. For instance, Kirkland discusses classical Daoist responsible non-action (*wuwei* 無為) mainly in *Laozi and Zhuangzi*, in opposition to modern humanism's moral duty in an ecological context, without delving into the socio-political implications of *wuwei* (Kirkland 2001, 299). For another example, Jullien emphasizes the non-moral value of cultivating "a long life" instead of a "good" one, though he does not elaborate the socio-political connotations of such a lifestyle with regard to the governmental institutions and civil society of today, nor regarding the pressing environmental crisis (Jullien 2005, 19).

In contrast, Nelson's *Daoism as Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* proposes various ecological biopolitical modes of governing grounded on the *ethos* and the *praxis* of nourishing life. These are: eco-legalism based on the *Huanglao* 黃老 thought of legal governance, dark primitivism inspired by the figure of Shennong as a sage-ruler, and an anarchic mode of government derived from Yang Zhu's self-interested individual bearing on the non-coercive and non-dominant *ethos* of Dao (Nelson 2021, 116). While Nelson is aware of the tendency of an authoritarian leadership in the legalist model in early Daoist philosophy, he nonetheless relates the *ethos* of Dao to a potentially non-authoritarian and ecological mode of government (ibid., 101). Discussing such an *ethos* in a modern political context, Nelson compares it to the concept of negative liberty.

The understanding of non-coercion expressed in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* intersects in ways with libertarian conceptions of what is called "negative liberty" in modern Western political philosophy, since they

both wish to allow the individual person and thing to follow its own tendencies with minimal externally imposed compulsion. They differ as the Western model promotes individual competition and contention between individuals for the sake of promoting and fulfilling human desires, minimizing political coercion while embracing capitalist economic and social coercion between individuals. *An adequate political philosophy must contest the coercive powers of the state, the market, as well as popular opinion.* (Nelson 2021, 116, my emphasis)

However, Nelson refers mainly to early Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* to discuss the *ethos* of Dao in its potentials of constituting an alternative way of government in relation to the environment in Western democratic states such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. For instance, Nelson relates the *ethos* to the aesthetics of free and easy play (*chuyou congong* 出遊從容) and the joy of fish (*yule* 魚樂) in “Autumn Floods” (*qiushui* 秋水) in the *Zhuangzi*, as well as the practice of fasting of the heart-mind that involves listening to the music of the Earth (*dilai* 地籟) and that of Heaven (*tianlai* 天籟) (Nelson 2021, 84, 86). While such accounts of the Daoist *ethos* help to elucidate the possibility to dismantle presuppositions of the identity and non-identity between the human and the non-human and deconstruct the limited and anthropocentric perspective of the human, I consider Ji Kang’s philosophy as providing more ways to further our understanding of the *ethos* of Dao and the *praxis* of nourishing life.

In this paper, the main object of critique—neoliberalism—refers specifically to the economy after the 1930s in the United States, where *governmental responsive action and regulatory technology conditions free-market competition*. In this sense, neoliberalism could include post-war Fordism based on mass production strongly associated with political and social order in the American context, but it is even more relevant in the post-Fordist flexible economy with the emergence of new organizational, economic, technological, and socio-political configurations. Neoliberalism differs from the other term libertarianism, namely a mode of governance in major European states such as the United Kingdom since the Enlightenment, notably originating from the philosophy of Adam Smith that proposes a mechanism of state government based on economic growth and the productivity of free exchange and competition, *with as less governmental intervention as possible*.

Further, I caution against Nelson’s definition of biopolitics as “deploying bodily, biological, and medical language and models for governing and ordering society”, without making explicit the intrinsic neoliberal implications of the term (Nelson 2021, 3). I consider it important to clarify that biopolitics, at least in *The*

Birth of Biopolitics, one of the lecture series given by Foucault at the College de France in 1978 and 1979, refers to a set of neoliberal governmental practices that proclaim to be “natural mechanisms” (Foucault 2004, 20). As such, I attempt to demonstrate the biopolitics of nourishing life as distinct from the neoliberal model, in view of recent scholarship that involves both Ji Kang’s and Foucault’s works, notably Jullien’s (2005) *Nourir sa vie. À l’écart du bonheur* and Heubel’s (2021a) *Cultivation and Critique. Late Foucault from a Transcultural Perspective* 修養與批判. 跨文化視野中的晚期傅科.

Therefore, I propose a substantial account of a biopolitics of nourishing life based on Ji Kang’s philosophy, as an alternative to the neoliberal art of government discussed in Foucault. To do this, I will first specify the *ethos* of Dao in terms of a style (*fengdu* 風度) of simplicity (*jian* 簡), as a person’s non-coercive, non-dominant, and non-materialist relation to nature (*ziran* 自然) and Heaven (*tian* 天). I will then propose nourishing life as a biopolitical art of government and situate my proposition against Jullien’s misleading account of nourishing life in biopolitical terms, and Heubel’s relatively insufficient engagement with the political economic aspect of biopolitics in his work mentioned above.¹ Finally, I will show how Ji Kang’s *praxis* of *yangsheng* helps to consider a new technology of the self as a resistance to the neoliberal governmental technology that capitalizes the environment as a market-in-the-making in a modern society driven towards unlimited economic growth.

The *Ethos* of Dao: From the Wei-Jin Style to Ji Kang’s Simplicity

The *ethos* of Dao is fundamentally ethical, but not in a normative, conventional, or obligatory sense. Nelson regards Daoist ethics as an originary *ethos* and *praxis*, which means a way of life that is in accordance with Dao, contrasting ethics in terms of universal, prescriptive, fixated, and imperative forms of duty or commands (Nelson 2021, 41). More specifically, the *ethos* of Dao does not concern environmentalism or ecology in the modern scientific or activist meanings, but rather, consists of the spontaneous encounter (*yu* 遇) between beings and responsive (*ying* 應) attunement to the world, which is embodied (without being codified) in the *praxis* of emptying, fasting and forgetting (ibid., 41–42). Indeed, emptying (*xu* 虛), fasting (*zhai* 齋) and forgetting (*wang* 忘) are the three prominent technologies of nourishing life in Zhuangzi that Nelson prioritizes in his discussion of the *ethos* and *praxis* of the Dao.

1 For Heubel’s more sophisticated views on the political economic aspects of the subject, also see his 2021b book *Was ist chinesische Philosophie? Kritische Perspektiven* (231–34, 301–21).

However, while Zhuangzi stands as one of first thinkers who demonstrate the *ethos* of Dao in its non-coercive way of nourishing life, I consider the aesthetic style of the Seven Sages in the Bamboo Forest (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢) as an indispensable development of the *ethos*. In other words, I consider the *ethos* of Dao as three-dimensional: aesthetic, ethical, and political. As Nelson argues, the *ethos* of Dao, especially in the pre-Qin period, not only consists of a non-coercive and non-dominant way of government, in contrast to the libertarian model, but also implies an ethical attitude towards life and the world that breaks down pre-supposition of identity based on differentiation between the self and the other, and the human and the non-human (2021, 116). Yet I argue that this ethico-political dimension of the *ethos* of Dao is inseparable from the aesthetic dimension that the Seven Sages further develop, after Laozi and Zhuangzi. Simply put, the Seven Sages' aesthetic lifestyle—including their corporeal deportment, public exposure, and life experiences—*embody*, in flesh and blood or in their own persons, the ethico-political *ethos* of Dao.

As Rošker (2020, 34) points out, following Li (1994, 92), these Sages embody the so-called Wei-Jin style (*fengdu* 風度) in terms of “pure conversation” (*qingtán* 清談), which consists of a “seemingly aloof, careless and self-satisfied attitude, caring for nothing and for everything”. Indeed, with this lifestyle, the Seven Sages still remain a controversial cultural phenomenon in the history of Chinese philosophy, especially in relation to their interpretations of three texts of profundity (*sanxuan* 三玄, namely the *Daodejing* 道德經, *Zhunagzi* 莊子 and *Yijing* 易經). For instance, Pei Wei (267–300 AD) in the Western Jin dynasty criticizes the Sages for being superficial, idle, morally loose, and irresponsible when appointed in office; for another, Ge Hong (287–343 AD) attacks them for actions that go against the proper demeanour of the *xuanxue* scholars in society, such as revealing one's body in public, or excreting stools and urine in front of people (Tang 2000, 28–29).² As such, these men seem to have no scruples about social conventions or worldly values, always drinking, behaving strangely, and talking in public. It is only in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) that such negative receptions of the *xuanxue* or Neo-Daoist scholars in the Wei-Jin period changed, and in early modern Chin, scholars like Zhang Binglin and Liu Shippei consider *xuan* 玄 learnings as emancipating (*ibid.*, 29–30).

However, the Seven Sages live in accordance to the *ethos* of Dao by performing public debates on the three texts of profundity, and showcasing elegance and wit

2 “(裴)顧深患時俗放蕩，不尊儒術，何晏、阮籍素有高名于世，口談虛浮，不遵禮法，尸祿耽寵，仕不事事。” “世人聞戴叔鸞、阮嗣宗傲俗自放，見謂大度，而不量其材力，非傲生之匹，而慕學之，或亂項科頭，或裸袒蹲夷，或濯脚于稠眾，或溲便于人前，或停客而獨食，或行酒而止所親。” See Tang Yijie 湯一介，郭象與魏晉玄學 (*Guo Xiang and Xuanxue in the Wei-Jin Dynasties*) (2000, 28–29).

as Gentlemen of Note (*mingshi* 名士) (Mou 1983, 227). As such, if the Sages embody the *ethos* and *praxis* of Dao, how to account for such an ethics in terms of a certain lifestyle? For Sages like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, for instance, naturalness or self-so being (*ziran* 自然) as an orderly and harmonious unity without differentiation or distinctions between the myriad things, *should* set the example for the human society. But in their time, the Sima regime propagated the names and teaching (*mingjiao* 名教) of Confucian moral codes to sustain its reign as an influential family (*menfa shijia* 门阀世家), and was corrupt, brutal, and lived an extravagant lifestyle. In this way, the names and teaching do not reflect the order and the harmony of nature, and instead betrays Confucian moral ethics (Tang 2000, 49). In other words Ji Kang, despite being a member of the influential family of Cao, is a Gentleman of Note (*mingshi* 名士) but dismisses the names and teaching (*mingjiao* 名教) that is detached from naturalness. As such, although Ji Kang recognizes the order of the hierarchy in a Confucian context, and he and his fellow Sages turn to Laozi and Zhuangzi as the masters of keeping the names and teaching in line with naturalness in human society (*ibid.*, 50).³

Further, Mou considers the Gentlemen of Note in terms of the subject of talent and nature (*caixing zhuti* 才性主體), who nonetheless fall short of being moral subjects (*daode zhuti* 道德主體) (Mou 2003, 57). This is because talents and natures of the person in the Seven Sages are different and distinct from one another (diverse and multileveled), whereas in Mencius and the Neo-Confucians in the Song and Ming Dynasties the moral nature of the person is universal (*ibid.*). In other words, if one takes the talents of performing elegance and wit or the Wei-Jin style as the criteria for ethics, then not everyone can meet the requirements needed to be a Gentlemen of Note, and this inequality based on individual talents and styles does not correspond to Mou's premise that morality is universal and within every man's reach. It is not surprising that Mou presupposes the universality of the moral subject or, more precisely, the *a priori* in Kant's moral philosophy. But the *ethos* of Dao *per se* opposes the categorical imperative or any other variations of deontological or consequentialist moralities which are prevalent in modern or contemporary times (Nelson 2021, 41).

In contrast with modern ethics, I regard the Wei-jin style (*fengdu* 風度) to be resonating with what Foucault calls the stylization of life (*bios*) in terms of the ancient Greek ethics of the care of the self. I disagree with Nelson's rejection of approximating Daoist ethics to aretaic and perfectionist virtue (and thus a virtue ethics, such as in Socrates, Aristotle, or the Stoics) that he considers "self-concerned *care*

3 To some extent, Ji Kang's philosophy has a Confucian dimension, as he holds that hierarchy in a society should be natural and not coerced by the ruler, instead of negating all forms of hierarchy.

of the self and the forced imposition of its own paradigmatic ideal of perfection onto the world” (Nelson 2021, 42, my emphasis). Instead of foregrounding ethical perfectionism or virtue ethics, I reconsider the notion “*heautou epimeleisthai*”, literally meaning “looking after oneself” or “caring for oneself”, as treating *bios* primarily as an *aesthetic* concern in ancient Greek philosophy and culture (Foucault 1984, 58). It appears in Socratic, Stoic, and Epicurean philosophy, notably manifest in *The Apology of Socrates* and *Alcibiades*, and emphasizes giving existence “a certain shape” and “a certain style” (ibid., 148). For instance, in Socrates one lives in accordance what one says as truth (*alêtheia*). Such saying (*logos*) primarily involves the ethical-ontological dimension of the care of the self.

However, a non-Socratic mode of care of the self consists in the practice of truth through “straight talk” (*parrêsia*). This “talk” refers to nothing verbal, but rather a style of living in the public gaze without self-concealment imposed by norms, conventions, and institutions, manifest in cynicism (Foucault 2009, 145). The cynic lets truth “incorporate his body” without the mediation of *logos*; it is about taking the body as a theatrical place for a plastic manifestation of truth (ibid., 160). In other words, the cynic kind of care of the self consists of an aesthetic style of embodying truth which is, at the same time, an ethical mode of “speaking” bluntly in public, not through linguistic discourses, but bodily comportment and showing one’s personality.

Not unlike the *ethos* that the cynic embodies through such straight talk, the style of the Gentlemen of Note in the Wei-Jin period concerns not so much the content of the “pure conversations”, but the personalities and attitudes (*renge zitai* 人格姿态) that they manifest. More specifically, it is about the character of *simplicity* (*jian* 簡) rather than eloquence or rhetoric. Simplicity does not necessarily relate to the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, for certain scholars who are distant from classical Daoism can also “be simple” (Xie 1997, 166). In an open way, the Wei-Jin style does not pertain to a strictly defined philosophical *position*, but rather specific “thoughts and attitudes” of multiple possibilities: for instance, being straightforward and understanding (*jianming tongda* 簡明通達), being light-hearted and free of vulgarity (*jiandan tuosu* 簡淡脫俗), or being unconventional and unrestrained (*jianlue xingji* 簡略行跡) (ibid., 167–68). The examples for these different types of simple characters and attitudes are Shan Tao, Ji Kang, and Ruan Ji, respectively.

However, in Ji Kang’s case, simplicity is inseparable from a non-materialist and reclusive lifestyle, which does not emphasize the role of bodily performance or corporeal comportment in public as much as in the cynic’s care of the self. As Chai points out, this lifestyle consists in letting go of materialist pursuit, avoiding emotional disruptions, and preventing spiritual illness.

Ji Kang's *Nourishing Life* is a work whose primary objective is to push human well-being in a non-materialist direction. Having witnessed the pitfalls and self-inflicted damage arising from a lifestyle discordant with Nature, Ji Kang saw himself in a world surrounded by emotional instability and spiritual malaise. His solution was to argue for the banishment of physical and emotional temptation from one's heart-mind by making emptiness its abode and stillness its path to quietude. The reason for doing so is to rectify one's physical manner of living and from this, Ji Kang says, one's *non-corporeal* experience will become richer and prolonged. In this way, harmony plays a vital role not only in the cohesiveness of the world, but also in one's ability to successfully master the essentials of life. (Chai 2017, 52, my emphasis)

Simplicity as a non-materialist lifestyle is not compatible with the subtle and imperceptible accumulations of corruption at both physical and spiritual levels, which arise from one's entanglement with external things, fame and profit, thoughts, or emotions (ibid., 44). But the spirit is more important than the body, for the disruption of the spirit (*jingshen* 精神) will lead to the disorder of the physical form (*xinghai* 形骸) (Henricks 1983, 24; Dai 2015, 229).

In sum, the simple or non-materialist lifestyle as the *ethos* of Dao boils down to a principle of harmony (*he* 和) that helps to preserve nature (*ziran* 自然) within the self and achieve great accordance (*dashun* 大順) of Dao: "while the One (*yi* 一) is the first onto-cosmological condition of the universe, what ensures that its undifferentiated wholeness remains intact and does not annihilate itself is harmony" (Chai 2017, 50). In this sense, harmony reveals the first order principle of the Dao expressed in terms of the One, and the balanced and compatible relation between things in terms of unity or collectivity (ibid., 50-51). In other words, harmony consists of the order of the cosmological reality, namely the responsive attunement (*wuwei* 無為)⁴ of Nature as the Heaven and the Earth (*tiandi* 天地) that the sage appreciates, and his capacity to assimilate this responsive attunement in his self-cultivating *praxis* (*gongfu* 工夫) to be *natural*

4 I follow Nelson's translation of *wuwei* 無為 as responsive attunement in his work *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy*, which denotes the non-dominant and non-coercive process of following things in their own course (*shun wu ziran* 順物自然) and recognizing the perspectives of self-generative realities (whether non-human or human) (Nelson 2021, 55). In this paper, I use this term to imply a contrast with certain forms of ecological *activism* in contemporary society that risk resorting to radical and irreversible actions. For instance, certain forms of anti-anthropocentric activism call for eradicating humans to save other species and the Earth. As such, my usage of *wuwei* 無為 in terms of responsive attunement is contextualized in my discussion of Daoism as potential resources to provide an alternative environmental way of thinking.

or “self-so” (*ziran* 自然), unperturbed, without clinging to things (*wuzhi wuwei* 無執) such as material possessions (*fugui* 富貴) or intellectual pursuits (*zhiyong* 智用) (Xie 1997, 16).

Natural Government and Environmental Technology

Despite the fact that Ji Kang holds on to naturalness or being self-so (*ziran* 自然), as against the predominant reign of names and teaching (*mingjiao* 名教) during the Wei-Jin Period, Jullien nevertheless claims the impossibility of political resistance in the *praxis* of nourishing life. As the following citation shows, Jullien stresses Ji Kang’s failure to stand up for himself and against power, and his lack of critical attitude towards the despotic ruler of the Sima 司馬 regime that eventually executes him.

By indulging in the unitary celebration of “Harmony”, by refusing to enter into dissonance with the “natural” in order to consider the conditions of an *autonomy*; consequently, *by conceiving no essence, form or model (of the Just or the Good), external to the world and transcending this world towards which our aspirations tend*, the Chinese scholar [Ji Kang] submitted himself, and without possible contestation, to the arbitrariness of the relations of force; and legitimizing these in the cosmological terms of Heaven and Earth, *yin* and *yang*, will only increase the alienation. By refusing to think about conflict, he enslaved himself. (Jullien 2005, 165, my translation and emphasis)

The theoretical basis for this claim is what Jullien calls a process of silent transformation (*mohua* 默化) underlying a mode of government (*zhi* 治) of nourishing life that consists of the global transition of the atmosphere of a country (*guofeng* 國風), without involving a rebellious subject, political action, heroic revolution or—simply put—critical thinking.⁵

5 “For all that, isn’t this discreet influence, distilled from day to day, more effective eventually—the Chinese literati tell us repeatedly—than all this forcing and fuss made in heroic actions or prescriptions of Salvation? Because it [silent transformation] is everywhere, in everything, and we will measure the results of this beneficial process—namely the *mœurs*, mores, being the ambient conditioning [of silent transformation] in contrast to individual morality and the choice of the Subject. And will we not even perceive these results in the serene and confident, non-recriminatory airs forming the ‘atmosphere of a country’ (*guo-feng* 國風), in which we hear the common people sing, as reflections of these peaceful times, spreading in confidence and good understanding, during their daily work? There is certainly nothing spectacular or heroic about this.” (Jullien 2009, loc.11 of 91, my translation and emphasis)

In this sense, the art of government of a political body consists in enabling the imperceptible transformation of the “mores and atmosphere” (*feng* 風) which corresponds to the refined (*jing* 精) and subtle (*wei* 微) change of one’s physical and spiritual life. Ji Kang emphasizes the subtle (*wei* 微) loss of one’s life in terms of a “subterranean” (*souterraine*) or “imperceptible” (*inaperçue*) “propensity” (*propension*) (Jullien 2005, 143).⁶ As such, in Jullien’s account, “governing” (*zhi* 治) a country corresponds to “nourishing” (*yang* 養) oneself, taking up a double meaning of both *curing or treating* one’s corporeal being (*zhishen* 治身) and *ruling or governing* a country (*zhiguo* 治國), thus rendering the corporeal being of the person in parallel with the corpus of the state, and the meticulous inspection of one’s exhaustion of the vital force or energy (*qi* 氣) the prince’s careful supervision of the misuse of a state’s resources (*ibid.*, 133). Thus, a biopolitical art of government consists of the natural and invisible process of preventing the loss of life.

I oppose Jullien’s account of such naturalistic art of government (*zhi* 治) on two grounds. First, Jullien’s interpretation of natural government is misleading, for he bases his account mainly on the Ruist and Legalist ideas on non-interfering government (*wuwei erzhi* 無為而治) instead of the Daoist *ethos* and *praxis* of nourishing life. *Prima facie*, it seems that Jullien bases his claim on a statement in Ji Kang’s *Essay on Nourishing Life*: “when the spirit (*shen* 神) is disturbed on the inside, the form (*xing* 形) wastes away on the out, just as when the ruler is confused above, the state is chaotic below. 精神之於形骸, 猶國之有君也; 神躁於中, 而形喪於外, 猶君昏於上, 國亂於下也” (Henricks 1983, 24; Dai 2015, 229).

However, with this ‘natural’ way of government, Jullien confuses the Daoist biopolitics of nourishing life with the Ruist and Legalist biopolitical models. As Nelson notes, Ruist and Legalist discourses on “non-engagement or non-interference in affairs” (*wushi* 無事) that facilitate the emperor’s “rule through non-action” (*wuwei erzhi zhe* 無為而治者), but contrary to what Jullien depicts as silent transformation, this does not mean governing with no effort, despite the façade of a noninterfering government (Nelson 2021, 50–51). In view of my discussion above on Ji Kang’s *ethos* of simplicity (*jian* 簡) and *praxis* based on the principle of harmony (*he* 和), I consider Ji Kang’s approach to nourishing life very different from, if not entirely opposed to, the Ruist and Legalist ones, though he compares the governor to the spirit, and the political body to the physical form.

6 “Turning to [those who] in taking care of their bodies neglect the principle, they lose it in the unseen. When things unseen build up they turn into harm; accumulated harm becomes decline. From decline comes white hair; from white hair comes old age; from old age comes death. Unaware of what is going on, [they think] it has no cause. Those below middle intelligence say this is natural. 至於措身失理, 亡之於微, 積微成損, 積損成衰, 從衰得白, 從白得老, 從老得終, 悶若無端, 中智以下, 謂之自然。” (Henrich 1983, 27; Dai 2015, 230–31)

Furthermore, Jullien fails to give a distinct account of a subject based on Ji Kang's nourishing life. Similar to the aforementioned claim from Mou that *Xuanxue* 玄學 or Neo-Daoism falls short of a moral philosophy due to the lack of a universal moral subject, Jullien's criticism of Ji Kang focuses on the absence of a political or critical subject (Jullien 2005, 165). Against such claims, Heubel attempts to give an account of the cultivating and nourishing subject (*xiuyang zhuti* 修養主體) based on an aesthetics of blandness (*pingdan meixue* 平淡美學) in various Chinese contexts, in contrast with the transgressive aesthetics (*yuejie meixue* 越界美學) in Foucault (Heubel 2021a, 40).

However, although Heubel touches upon nourishing life in Ji Kang, he resorts mainly to erotic arts (*fang zhong shu* 房中術) in medical texts such as *Yi xin fang* 醫心方 from the Sui dynasty (581–618 AD), to discuss Daoist biopolitics in terms of an economy of forces (*liliang jingji* 力量經濟). This economy nourishes the vital energy (*jingqi* 精氣) and enables the government of the self (*ziwo zhili* 自我治理) that entails the subjectivation of the nourishing person, especially the on part of the female (ibid., 224, 226). Moreover, Heubel's account of the nourishing subject remains relatively laconic compared to his elaboration of the transgressive subject in Foucault's care of the self or aesthetics of existence (ibid., 244). Moreover, although Heubel occasionally mentions the neoliberal dimension of Foucault's biopolitics, he nonetheless insufficiently engages with this political economic aspect in his discussion of the subject of nourishing life (*xiuyang zhuti* 修養主體) (ibid., 265). This is not to say that Heubel fails to capture the nourishing subject, but that he does not relate the nourishing subject to the neoliberal subject. For instance, Heubel could have clarified the potential advantage of Daoist biopolitics compared to the neoliberal model in terms of an alternative way of subjectivation.

In view of Jullien's failure to account for the subject of nourishing life and Heubel's lack of engagement in the political economic aspect of it in the specific context of his work *Cultivation and Critique*, I consider the subject of nourishing life in terms of its self-cultivating practice (*ziwo shijian gongfu* 自我修養工夫) which requires a set of technology of the self (*ziwo jishu* 自我技術). To do this, I analyze what Foucault calls "environmental technology" (*la technologie environnementale*) in the neoliberal government of the self, and contrast this with the Daoist cultivating technology.

It is important to recall the non-coercive *ethos* of Dao as opposed to the coercive *ethos* of neoliberalism. Individuals facing increasing competition in a neoliberal society are compelled to govern themselves in a narrowly defined rationality based on cost and benefit (Tanke 2022, 8). As Nelson notes, the Legalist biopolitical model

can appear as a Western “laissez faire-like” mode of government, but the former does not imply non-intervention into disputes, conflicts of interests, or competition between groups of interest or among different governments (Nelson 2021, 52).

Indeed, libertarian biopolitics packages its coercive characteristic in terms of a “natural mechanism” of the market (Foucault 2004, 33).

For political economy, nature is not a reserved and original region on which the exercise of power should not have a hold, unless it is illegitimate. Nature is something that runs under, through, and within the very exercise of power. In the very exercise of governmentality. It is, if you like, the indispensable hypodermis. It is the other side of something whose visible face—well, visible to the rulers—is their own action. Their own action has an underside, or rather it has another side, and this other side of governmentality, well, that’s precisely what political economy studies in its own necessity. It is not a background, but a perpetual correlative [to the action]. Thus, the economists will explain, for instance, that it is a law of nature that the population, for example, moves towards the highest wages; it is a law of nature that a customs tariff which protects high subsistence prices will inevitably lead to something like a shortage. (Foucault 2004, 18, my translation)

As such, Foucault differentiates libertarianism in terms of “natural” government from disciplinary society that reposes on the “internal subjugation [*assujettissement*] of individuals” (ibid., 265). In other words, it is not about subjugating individuals to a set of codes or laws that restrict freedom—for instance, the rules established and imposed on residents in prisons or psychiatrist institutions. Rather, it concerns intervening the “rules of the game” that allow for the production and consumption of freedom on the part of individuals themselves as players of economic activities (ibid., 178). In this sense, individuals, producing and consuming *economic* freedom—such as freedom of the market, freedom of the seller and the buyer, free exercise of the right to property, freedom of discussion and expression—become both the subject and the object of government (ibid., 65). To this extent, liberal governmentality outdoes disciplinary society, for the former involves a process of *subjectivation* where individuals, instead of being passively restricted and limited, actively play the game of an economy whose rules nonetheless need constant regulation that ensures the economy’s “natural” development and the subjects’ free enterprise.

Further, the game of the economy—especially after the economic crisis in the 1930s and with the emergence of neoliberal governmental practices in the

post-war United States—requires no interference from an external system, but only governmental interventions that derive from the economic framework based on the free market and pure competition. More precisely, the legal or ethical frameworks of a neoliberal government are not the “superstructure” (as in Marxism) that regulate economic activities, but rather, it is the economy *per se* that sets the conditions of its own possible existence which could be social, human, ecological, juridical, etc. (Flew 2015, 322; Asiyambi 2018, 535). Thus, the “natural” mechanism of the market cannot directly function without the judicial or legal interventions of the state, which is in some way similar to the cultivation of some organisms that is not viable without human efforts.

Foucault considers such governmental intervention in terms of “responsive actions” with a new type of governmental technology called “environmental technology” or “environmental psychology” (Foucault 2004, 264–65). To be more precise, responsive or environmental actions are *penal* actions based on the calculation of possible gains and losses, while environmental technology involves an *optimization of systems of differences, enabling a tolerance for self-governing practices of the minority* (ibid.). In this sense, “environmental” refers to the global and all-encompassing feature of neoliberal governmental practices, which transcends the economic realms. In other words, non-normalization or tolerance stems from the overarching explanatory prism of economic productivity that accounts for every human activity regardless of their differences, and interprets every entity as an enterprise, whether public or private, individual, or communal. Therefore, I consider the neoliberal art of government in terms of this “environmental technology” that renders everything governable in economically productive terms. To this extent, any neoliberal governmental action is, by definition, “environmental”.

However, when the overarching “environmental technology” embedded in all neoliberal governmental practices is manifest in the specific domain of environmentalism, it involves a problematization of the lack of economic evaluation of an environment. For instance, in neoliberal environmental planning a forest is managed in terms of a market-in-the-making, while the increase in the financial revenues of the local communities boosts the incentives for a project that transforms the forest (Asiyambi 2018, 541). Transformation of the subject takes place on two levels: changing the subjects’ mindset regarding their relation to things such as forests and the climate in economic terms, and modifying the subjects’ actions through penalties (ibid., 539). In other words, an environmental project amounts to the marketization of a forest in economic and legal senses of the term, and it implies also the normalization of lifestyle practices of the minority of the

community that live in the forest, as long as they produce economic freedom.⁷ As such, environmental protection in the neo-liberal context appears as tolerant and non-normalizing, but remains coercive to the extent that the communities are included and accepted into the game of the economy as subjects that produce freedom in strictly economic terms.⁸ In this sense, the so-called “environmental technology” of the neoliberal biopolitical model deprives an environment, such as a forest or river, of meanings and values that are non-economic, and exclude the human-environment relations that are not conforming to the production of the subjects’ economic freedom.

Against Homo Œconomicus: Technology of the Self in the Praxis of Yangsheng

In view of the neoliberal natural art of government and environmental technology, I consider the formation of the subjects who govern themselves as players in the economic game as the key to understanding and countering the neoliberal biopolitical model. As discussed above, the subjects who govern themselves are neither conformed to a normative or virtue ethics, nor subjugated to a set of codified moral law or deontological morality; instead, they are actively calculating gains and losses, and thus the *consequences* of their decisions and choices in a market economy with increasing competition. Indeed, long before the emergence of neoliberalism in the 20th century, classical libertarianism was already entangled with consequentialist moral ethics deeply embedded in utilitarianism. Foucault proposes a genealogy of *homo Œconomicus* originated from the subject of interest in empiricist thinkers such as Locke and Hume (Foucault 2004, 275–76). But at the same time, the subject is also defined as purely immanent and with cost-benefit rationality in a utilitarian sense (Tanke 2022, 11).

7 In view of such normalization of a minority’s lifestyle in neoliberalism, it is helpful to distinguish the discussion of a Daoist ethos of simplicity from the contemporary concerns for cultivating an alternative lifestyle in a neoliberal society that often draws on Asian traditions and spiritual practices but remains in the neoliberal framework of productivity that emphasizes self-enhancement. For instance, Jullien points out the commodification of Zen in contemporary society as a coercive “antistress” sort of lifestyle (2005, 151). In this sense, one enounces “Be Zen!” as a command that is no different from “Be cool!”, implying an entire antistress economy that allegedly protects the subject from over-excitation and exhaustion while participating in economic games, and yet only enhances the subject’s capacity to tolerate such excitation and exhaustion and sustain such participation.

8 Commentators such as Dean and Zamora (2021, 40) remain skeptical about whether neoliberalism provides resources to reconsider political resistance or minority practices, though Foucault claims that his late project on biopolitics is about searching a way to be “less governed”.

I consider the economic human in Mill, no less important than the empiricist subject of interest, as the foundation of neoliberal biopolitics. One can trace the concept of the economic human back to Mill's "On the Definition of Political Economy; and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It", though naturally Mill never uses the term *homo œconomicus* (Persky 1995, 221–31). Mill compares political economy's (and generally speaking, speculative politics) investigation into the social body with the physiological studies of the human body and considers the discipline as a foundation for "*the art of governing*" (Mill 1967, 320–21, my emphasis). But political economy assumes man as naturally preferring greater amount of wealth which Mill finds problematic (ibid.). As such, the economic human is the "being who does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessities, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial" (ibid., 326). To this extent, the self-governing subject in the libertarian economy finds its roots in the consequentialist subject that rationalizes the cost and benefit of one's actions.

While in classical libertarianism the economic men are free to pursue individual interests and limit state power, in the neoliberal governmental model they become easily manipulable, as "the point of application for a managerial power that controls environmental variables in order to bring about a desired conduct" (Tanke 2022, 11–12). As mentioned earlier, neoliberal governmentality entails a set of responsive or environmental technology that coerces individuals to form economic relations to things to achieve capital increase. But such technologies transcend the economic realm and expand to every other aspect of humanity, such as amelioration of biological and social behaviours like marriage and reproduction to improve the "human capital" (Foucault 2004, 233–34). As such, I sympathize with Tanke in the recognition that Foucault resorts to the ancient Greek notion of the care of the self or ethics as living one's life as a work of art for a possible model of the *homo aestheticus* to resist the government of the self in *homo œconomicus* (Tanke 2022, 19).

However, despite the potential ethical and political implications of the care of the self in response to neoliberalism, in this instance I focus on the Daoist biopolitics as an alternative governmental model that centres around the subject of nourishing life, as opposed to *homo œconomicus*. To account for the subject of nourishing life, I reaffirm the *ethos* of Dao as non-material, non-coercive, and harmonious, which calls for a process of *praxis* that implement and perpetuate such *ethos* as the person's lifestyle. More specifically, the *praxis* concerns a cultivating practice (*xiuyang gongfu* 修養工夫) consisting of a series of technologies of the self (*ziwo jishu* 自我技術).

In Ji Kang, some of these technologies concern the nourishment of one's physical being (*yangxing* 養形). Following Laozi, "he diminishes self-interest and lessens his desires" (*shaosi guayu* 少私寡慾) (ibid., 29). For example, he avoids rich flavours (*zi wei* 滋味), unstrained wine (*li* 醴), fragrant (*xiangfang* 香芳), delight and anger (*xinu* 喜怒), thought and concern (*silü* 思慮), grief and joy (*aile* 哀樂), even in the smallest amount (Henricks 1983, 26; Dai 2015, 230). But he welcomes contact with harmonious things in nature like water, sun, even harmonious arts like music, for such activities nurtures harmony (*he* 和) and leads to a long life (*chang sheng* 長生): "he steams himself with magic fungus and soaks in sweet water from a spring; dries himself off in the morning sun and soothes himself with the five strings" (Henricks 1983, 29–30; Dai 2015, 232).

However, I consider the technology of the self on the spiritual level as more crucial than the physical level in the process of the formation of the subject, or in Foucauldian terms, *subjectivation* or transformation of the subject. In the ancient Greek tradition of *askêsis*, subjectivation refers to the spiritual exercise and the *technê* of modifying oneself to become a subject capable of accessing truth and freedom (Foucault 2001, 17). In a similar way, the *praxis* in Ji Kang prioritizes spiritual cultivation (*yangshen* 養神) that entails the practice of the subject (*zhuti shijian* 主體實踐), which breaks with the Daoist religious practice that treats the pursuit of a long life (*changsheng* 長生) as the ultimate goal (Xie 1997, 104, 111). In other words, although both Ji Kang's philosophy and Daoist religion stress spiritual cultivation, they imply entirely different technologies of the self.

From a religious perspective, spiritual cultivation overrides the physical, though it is for the sake of an effective maintenance of the vital energy (*qi* 氣) in the person as well as the universe. For instance, Daoist texts such as *Xiang'er zhu* 想爾注 discuss the possibility of cultivating the spirit "without a body" (*wushen* 無身) (Rao 1991, 16). But when it comes to the actual technology to cultivate the spirit, religious practices tend to embrace simplicity and plainness (*jiansu baopu* 見素抱樸) and admonish self-control (*dangzi yuechi* 當自約持) as a general attitude or lifestyle (ibid., 19). In this context, cultivating the spirit is about keeping the Oneness (*shouyi* 守一) of the vital energy (*qi* 氣) that circulates between Heaven (*tian* 天), and the Earth (*di* 地) and transforms itself into the *jing* 精 and *shen* 神 in the person (*ren* 人) (Xie 1997, 102). Therefore, I consider this kind of technology of the self as limited to the control of one's will and desires for the purpose of longevity, without a further concern for the subject's transformative power.

By contrast, Ji Kang's *yangsheng lun* 養生論 mentions but does not attach much importance to the practice of cultivating the vital energy through inhalation and exhalation (*huxi tuna* 呼吸吐納) and the usage of medicine as a way to nourish

health (*fushi yangshen* 服食養身) (Henricks 1983, 24; Dai 2015, 230). As for the technology of cultivating the spirit (*yangshen* 養神), Ji Kang speaks less of keeping the Oneness (*shouyi* 守一) than maintaining the emptiness (*xu* 虛) and quietude (*jing* 靜) of the heart-mind (*xin* 心). For instance, taking after Zhuangzi, he practices the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋) that helps to forget (*wang* 忘) emotions and avoid overthinking (*lü* 慮): “he forgets happiness, and as a result his joy is complete; he leaves life behind, and as a result his person is preserved 忘歡而後樂足, 遺生而後身存” (Henricks 1983, 30; Dai 2015, 232).

As such, the technology of emptiness and quietude forms the cultivating subject as opposed to the economic human who calculates cost and benefit and produces economic freedom. First, Ji Kang as the subject of nourishing life turns away from fame and profit (*ming li* 名利), in contrast to *homo œconomicus* who is driven to maximize self-interest.⁹ The self-cultivating subject’s autonomy or freedom does not necessarily lie in the simple rejection of economic power, but in the capacity to treat wealth and poverty as one. For instance, in *An Answer to Xiang Xiu’s Refutation of My Essay on Nourishing Life*, Ji Kang responds to Xiang Xiu’s refutation of *yangsheng* based on the latter’s utilitarian view of wealth and power. Ji Kang underlines the detrimental effect of economic affluence (*fugui* 富貴), and holds that the Perfect Man (*zhiren* 至人) remains indifferent to it (Henricks 1983, 41, Dai 2015, 270). In cases where the Perfect Man cannot avoid serving as the ruler, he remains “one with the whole nation in being self-attained (*zide* 自得)”, which means that he does not seek to maximize wealth but remains content with what the society already possesses (*ibid.*) Although he occupies the position of the governor, he pays no attention to luxury and treats it as modest objects (*ibid.*).

This capacity of treating poverty and wealth in the same way relies on the technology of the self that empties out and quietens the heart-mind. Ji Kang, like Zhuangzi, grounds the transformation of the subject on the harmony (*he* 和) between the person (*ren* 人) and the environment (*huanjing* 環境), or literally “the surrounding world” in anthropological, physiological, and cosmological terms, encompassing Heaven (*tian* 天), Earth (*di* 地) and the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物). The *praxis* consists in assimilating the responsive attunement (*wuwei* 無為) of Heaven and Earth, and keeping intact one’s nature or self-so being (*ziran* 自然). According to Jullien, who follows Guo Xiang’s annotation of the *Zhuangzi*, the sage’s capacity to nourish oneself with harmony is not an essence (predetermined and eternal), but a *technology of the self* to be worked on through the infinite practice of *refinement* (*jing er you jing*

9 As for the specific political context, Ji Kang’s wife came from the Cao family, antagonists of the Sima family who were in power. After having served for some time for the Cao’s regime before that of Sima, Ji Kang withdrew from the political scene – despite his reputation as a literate genius and marriage which involved him in political conflicts (Chang 2017, 44).

精而又精) (Zhuangzi 2016, 342; Jullien, 2005, 65). In other words, nourishing with harmony lies primarily in the purification (*jing* 精) of life: filtering *external* or superfluous factors (for instance, money, fame, or power) that clutter up the vital process.

Second, the technology of emptiness and quietude also represents an effective way to resist what Foucault calls “environmental technology”, namely the neoliberal governmental practice to normalize and globalize the production of freedom as commodity, even when it comes to environmental projects. This is because the technology of emptiness and quietude consists of extracting the quintessence (*yangjing* 養精), concentrating on activities that help to repose (*xiu* 休) and nourish (*yang* 養) the spirit, and nurtures vigour (*jing* 精), for example, bathing in spring water and sunshine with good timing (Jullien, 2005, 65). As such, the technology of the self prioritizes repose over productivity, and stresses the process of nourishing over the result of production. Therefore, it implies a political strategy to counter the so-called “natural mechanism” of neoliberal government in personal life and private experience. In other words, the technology helps to facilitate a natural or independent (*ziran* 自然 or *ziji* 自己) art of *repose* in the encounters with things, humans and the environment, without this art being normalized, commodified, or marketized, and thus being reduced into another normalized lifestyle in the neoliberal framework.

This leads to my final consideration of technologies of nourishing life as a potential communal lifestyle that resists neoliberalism, instead of an aestheticized individual technology of self-enhancement. As Sloterdijk points out, modern aesthetics, being entangled with the Kantian concepts of freedom and progress and breaking with the existing world, is not so different from athleticism as the epitome of self-enhancement in a neoliberal economy. But the future of art is engaged with what he calls “meditative cybernetics”, namely a release from the instrumental relation to technology, by “letting things happen”, “trusting intelligent impulses”, and not being limited by predictions of the future (Sloterdijk 2017a, 302). This release involves the notion of anthropotechnics, which departs from Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* and indicates a new form of *askēsis* that constitutes humans and reshapes history in terms of technologies as modes of dwelling (Sloterdijk, 2013, 439). Technology in this context differs from *technē* in ancient Greece, with a teleological end in the *activity* of making art or the final production of a craft, which Foucault attempts to downplay in his discussion of the “technology of the self” in the context of the shaping of a community through an ascetic lifestyle. However, echoing Sloterdijk’s anthropotechnics, the Daoist technology *shu* 术 of the self is inseparable from the *ethos* of Dao 道 as the non-coercive and non-dominant responsive attunement (*wuwei* 无为) that lets things occur by themselves, without a proposing teleology or a progress that is yet to come.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a biopolitics of nourishing life as an environmental art of government, compared to the neoliberal model which is market-oriented, coercive, and materialist. Focusing on Ji Kang's nourishing life in terms of his simple lifestyle (*ethos*) and cultivating practice (*praxis*), I have shown the parallel between nourishing one's physical and spiritual being, and governing a society based on the non-coercive, non-materialist and harmonious *ethos* of Dao. Proposing an account of the subject of nourishing life, I have contributed to existing scholarship that either criticizes the lack of subjectivity in Ji Kang's philosophy or insufficiently engages with the political economic aspect of nourishing life. To account for the subject, I have integrated Foucault's discussion of the care of the self and biopolitics into the understanding of nourishing life as an art of life and government, explored the transformation of the subject of nourishing life through the technology of emptiness and quietude, and contrasted this with the subjectivation of *homo œconomicus*. The latter relies on the neoliberal "environmental technology" of reducing every entity (including the environment) into a profitable market and managing them as enterprises to produce economic freedom. Contrasting the two models of biopolitics, I have demonstrated that the biopolitics of nourishing life resists neoliberal environmentalism by opposing human relations with the environment in terms of capital increase and economic freedom, and by proposing a strategic repose that cannot be transformed into economic productivity.

Therefore, in a prescriptive aspect, Daoist technologies of the self do not aim for a better future, but prepare for something that is close to what Sloterdijk calls *Gehäuse* or "en-housing", namely making oneself at home in the current world, by releasing oneself from the coercive mode of living that perpetuates the neoliberal system (Sloterdijk 2017b, 119). To a certain extent, making oneself at home is not far from what Foucault calls building an anthropological community that does not incite a utopian revolution in the *status quo*, but instead remains in parallel with and independent from official governmental institutions or the state. They could be various social groups such as independent unions, theatres, and private schools, creating a parallel socio-political world rather than being instrumentalized by neoliberal structures (Havel, 1985, 48). In this sense, can one consider the Seven Sages in the Bamboo Forest in ancient China in terms of this kind of community? Perhaps not in a straight-forward way, yet it is certain that Ji Kang nourishes life within a social circle consisting of Gentlemen of Note. The precondition for such a community to come into being lies in the anthropological sense of subjectivation that Foucault discusses in *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*,

and the relation between this sense of subjectivation and technologies of nourishing life is open to further research.

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SPECIAL ISSUE
ECOLOGY IN ASIAN TRADITIONS:
Perspectives on Chinese and Buddhist
Environmental Philosophy

Asian and Intercultural Approaches to Nature
and the Environment

Green Orientalism, Brown Occidentalism and Chinese Ecological Civilization: Deconstructing the Culturalization of the Anthropocene to Nurture Transcultural Environmentalism

*Jean-Yves HEURTEBISE**

Abstract

Among the many things the Anthropocene is changing about human ways to live and think, one can include our understanding of human cultures and of their relations. Facing the Anthropocene and its diverse manifestations (climate change and rising temperatures, biodiversity loss and oceans acidification, etc.), there is a strong temptation to resort to predefined cultural assumptions to provide ready-made narratives of guilty scapegoats and unlikely saviours satisfying our religious need for radical alternatives and our exotic craving for deep otherness. This essay aims to critically analyse the various attempts to culturalize the Anthropocene with a focus on Green Orientalism and Brown Occidentalism—as we will coin the different culturalist narratives surrounding the notion of “Chinese Ecological Civilization”. Our goal is to promote the idea that the ubiquity of ecological issues calls for the Transculturality of Environmentalism. To achieve such a task, the deconstruction of the “onto-culturalism” of contemporary sinology is necessary.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Chinese ecological civilization, green orientalism, illiberal postcolonialism, transcultural environmentalism

Zeleni orientalizem, rjavi okcidentalizem in kitajska ekološka civilizacija: dekonstrukcija kulturalizacije antropocena za spodbujanje transkulturnega okoljevarstva

Izvilleček

Med mnoge stvari, ki jih antropocen spreminja glede človekovih načinov življenja in razmišljanja, lahko vključimo tudi naše razumevanje človeških kultur in njihovih odnosov. Ob soočanju z antropocenom in njegovimi raznolikimi pojavnimi oblikami (podnebne spremembe in naraščajoče temperature, izguba biotske raznovrstnosti, zakisanje oceanov itd.) obstaja velika skušnjava, da bi se zatekli k vnaprej določenim kulturnim

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predpostavkam, ki naj bi zagotavljale narejene naracije o grešnih kozlih in malo verjetnih rešiteljih, ki zadovoljijo naše religijske potrebe po radikalnih alternativah ter eksotičnem hrepenenju po globoki drugosti. Članek kritično analizira različne poskuse kulturalizacije antropocena s poudarkom na zelenem orientalizmu in rjavem okcidentalizmu, s pomočjo katerih želi ustvariti drugačne kulturalistične naracije, ki zajemajo pojem »kitajske ekološke civilizacije«. Cilj članka je promovirati idejo, da vseprisotnost ekoloških vprašanj zahteva transkulturalnost okoljevarstva. Za dosego te naloge pa je po avtorjevem mnenju nujna dekonstrukcija »ontokulturalizma« sodobne sinologije.

Ključne besede: antropocen, kitajska ekološka civilizacija, zeleni orientalizem, neliberalni postkolonializem, transkulturno okoljevarstvo

Chinese Ecological Civilization: Why Are We Comparative Scholars Still So Pious?

In 2007 China became the leading emitter of CO₂ in the world, and since 2013 its CO₂ emissions per capita have been higher than those of the European Union (Olivier et al. 2014, 24). It comes as a striking manifestation of the PRC government's specific "regime of truth" that during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the year when China became the leading CO₂ emitter, Hu Jintao officially promoted for the first time the concept of "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming*). One year before, Pan Yue, the former vice-director of the Environmental Protection Bureau, claimed that it would be the task of Chinese culture to set the agenda for this new civilizational turn that would replace the former "Western industrial civilization" which, because of its inherent "cultural bias" (anthropocentrism, dualism, etc.), led to environmental catastrophes (Pan Yue, 2006a).

However, considering that Chinese environmental problems have not decreased but instead increased (Yuan Yang 2016), that the country's CO₂ emissions have grown steadily since then (from 1.9 billion tones in 2007 to 2.9 billion in 2020), its energetic-mix is still primarily based on coal production and consumption (not only is its economy is still coal-dependent domestically (Greenpeace 2022), but also internationally, as China has become the main exporter of coal plants in the world via the Belt and Road Initiative) (Ewing 2019¹; Reynolds et al. 2018²), this

1 "As its massive domestic coal sector is squeezed by a saturation of existing plants, economic transitions away from heavy industry and a 'war on pollution,' China's powerful state-owned companies look abroad. The Shanghai Electric Group will build coal plants in Egypt, Pakistan and Iran with a combined capacity of 6,285 megawatts; that is nearly tenfold its planned constructions in China." (Ewing 2019)

2 "Coal-fired plants constitute half of announced CPEC [China Pakistan Economic Corridor] energy generation projects and 69% of capacity." (Reynolds et al. 2018)

paper will inquire into the system of belief that makes the concept of Chinese Ecological Civilization so attractive for many scholars. And specifically, it will examine how we, as cultural studies scholars, are still so pious about all things Chinese. Nietzsche wanted to question our will to truth; here we would like to question our will to err, our longing for being mistaken.

The need to deconstruct the concept of Chinese Ecological Civilization comes from the fact that this narrative demonstrates the “postcolonial” and “postmodern” tendency to culturize the Anthropocene. Critically addressing Chinese Ecological Civilization as a narrative resting on the dual framework of “Green Orientalism” and “Brown Occidentalism”, we will point to the fact that only a transcultural understanding of our environmental predicaments can help us to face their global ubiquity.

The Concept of Ecological Civilization in China: Pan Yue, Tu Weiming and *People's Daily*

It was Hu Jintao who, during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, first promoted the concept of “Ecological Civilization” at the highest official level in 2007. In that same year several definitions of the concept emerged (albeit globally redundant, with some minor variations): “Ecological civilization is a new stage of human civilization development, the new model of ethical socialization that follows the industrial civilization” (Li Jing-yuan et al. 2007); and “Ecological Civilization is the cultural ethical model that implies a harmonious symbiosis between Human Being and Nature, between Human Beings themselves, and between Human and Society. This is a virtuous cycle whose aims are a global development and a continual prosperity.” (*People's Daily* 2007) The concept became an integral part of the 12th Five-Year Plan in 2011 and, in 2013, during the third plenary session of the 18th Party Congress, it was included as one of the five national objectives (which were socialist economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction, and ecological civilization construction). In 2014, the constitution of a Small Leading Group (SLG) (Miller 2008, 2014) dedicated to Ecological Civilization was created inside the central SLG initiated in 2013 for the “deepening of social-political reforms”.

As a Vice-Minister for the Environment, Pan Yue (2006a) introduced the concept for the first time in 2006 to express the need to cope with the environmental degradation caused by economic development:

In 20 years, China has achieved economic results that took a century to attain in the West. But we have also concentrated a century's worth

of environmental issues into those 20 years. While becoming the world leader in GDP growth and foreign investment, we have also become the world's number one consumer of coal, oil and steel—and the largest producer of CO₂ and chemical oxygen demand emissions.

The culturalist aspect of the concept of Ecological Civilization is manifested in the fact that, according to Pan Yue, environmental problems in China are due to the adoption of the Western model of development:

We live with Chinese culture, but our modernization drive is based on Western logic. However, it's not a wise choice to copy the Western model of industrial modernization, especially in China, because that model will result in serious conflicts with the environment and resources in such a developing country as China. (Pan Yue 2006b)

Since environmental threats come from the “West”, to reduce the exposure of Chinese society to environmental risks it will be necessary to curb “Western cultural influence” and promote instead “Chinese cultural tradition”. As Pan Yue (*ibid.*) put it: “it's necessary to turn to the traditional Chinese culture for a correct guideline in our modernization and our cultural structure and to make the ecological wisdom in the Chinese civilization an important component of the ecological civilization.”

The notion that there is an important ecological component in Chinese civilization *per se* is quite a recent idea in China: it has been notably advocated by Tu Weiming in an article about New Confucianism and Ecology: “New Confucians' [...] ecological turn has great significance for China's spiritual self-definition, for it urges the nation to rediscover its soul. It also has profound implications for the sustainable future of the global community” (Tu 2011). To support his claim, Tu Weiming refers to the Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529) who professed the cosmological unity of men, animals and plants (and all things): “The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person.” (De Bary 1960, 659–60) An editorial published in March 2015 by the *People's Daily* merged Pan Yue's concept with Tu Weiming's claim to contend that the PRC's environmental policies are rooted in a traditional concern for nature that is specific to Chinese culture: the “Taoist” notion that “men and nature are one” and that men “must co-exist peacefully with Nature, and not try to dominate” is “one of the most essential components of Chinese tradition and China's most important contributions to humanity” (*People's Daily* 2015). The culturalist aspect in this claim lies in the hypothesis that it is in mainly virtue of its inherent “Western-cultural” component

that industrial development is threatening natural environments and that, as a consequence, by changing its cultural DNA, liberated from Western influence, national development in China will become ecological.

Recently, this concept has increasingly become a metric to be analytically assessed, and Chinese researchers have proposed quantifying the *amount* of “Ecological Civilization” implied by the management of watersheds (see Chen et al. 2022). However, in this paper we will address “Chinese Ecological Civilization” as primarily a “philosophical” concept. Acknowledging the fact that “Ecological Civilization” refers, in today’s PRC, to a political platform promoting environmental legislation at different national and regional levels, we will critically discuss the conceptual content and cultural narrative on which it is based.

Ecological Civilization and Brown Occidentalism

First, the claim about the inherent “Chineseness” of “Ecological Civilization” is to be understood in reference to the larger framework of “Occidentalism”. Occidentalism consists in perceiving the West as being deprived of soul and consciousness, alienated by monetary greed, corrupted by carnal luxury, and driven by the cold logic of mechanical materialism and disincarnated rationalism:

The mind of the West is often portrayed by Occidentalists as a kind of higher idiocy. To be equipped with the mind of the West is like being an idiot savant [...] It is a mind without a soul, efficient, like a calculator, but hopeless at doing what is humanly important. The mind of the West is capable of great economic success, to be sure, and of developing and promoting advanced technology, but cannot grasp the higher things in life, for it lacks spirituality and understanding of human suffering. (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 75)

From an Occidentalist perspective, the European Enlightenment was an era of Darkness: individual freedom, scientific rationalism and peaceful cosmopolitanism, the three conceptual pillars of modernity, are seen by Occidentalist writers as foreign seeds corrupting the cultural-moral integrity of the traditional non-Western social body nurtured by the values of collective obedience, emotional historicism, and heroic nationalism. Occidentalism first emerged in the writings of German romantic writers such as Schlegel, who

developed resentment against several aspects of modernity: urbanization, industrialization, and commercialization, and came, finally, to

resent everything French as the embodiment of this modernity [...] For Schlegel as well as other contemporary German romantics, the German claim to cultural superiority was founded in the alleged greater authenticity of German culture. [...] Schlegel consequently propagated an alliance of the Orient and the North against the Occident which he identified with the West and the South of Europe. (Dusche 2013, 31–54)

The same Occidentalist logic led Heidegger to embrace Nazi ideology: “Concerning 1933: I expected from National Socialism a spiritual renewal of life in its entirety, a reconciliation of social antagonism and a *deliverance of Western Dasein* ...” (Heidegger 1993a, 162).

The “proverbial” decline of the West and rise of the East (so widespread in the “sinosphere” nowadays—Schneider 2018) was already “prophesized” by Liang Qichao more than a century ago in the framework of his racialist understanding of history (Liang 1984, 16–17³):

The Chinese race of mine is the most powerful one on Earth. English and French can’t tame it, and can’t prevent its global prominence; as the saying goes: the East is rising while the West is declining.

然我中國人種，固世界最膨脹有力之人種也。英法諸人，非驚為不能壓抑之民族，即詫為馳突世界之人種，甚者且謂他日東力西漸。 (Liang 1999, 1079)

In many ways, the concept of Chinese Ecological Civilization looks like the “greenish” variation of Liang Shuming’s Easternization: “Easternization was a post-World War I concept attributed to Liang Shuming [...] It denoted an historic, messianic movement to save the West from moral deficiencies and crass materialism, providing an antidote to the perceived ills of Western society” (Fung 2010, 73).

Along the same lines, one can also make reference to the *Manifesto for a Reappraisal of Sinology and the Reconstruction of Chinese Culture* written by Zhang Junmai, Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, and Xu Fuguan. In this *Manifesto*, as noted by the editors of the *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, the New Confucian scholars “give an analysis of the weakness of the modern Western civilization, including its obsession with rapid progress and unlimited expansion” (Chan et al. 2000). Indeed, according to the authors of the *Manifesto*:

3 “What is History? History is nothing but the struggle between races 歷史者何？敘人種之發達與其競爭而已。” (Liang 1984, 16–17; our translation)

the strength of the West's cultural spirit lies in its ability to push ahead indefinitely. However, there is not secure foundation underlying this feverish pursuit of progress. Along this pursuit of progress there is a feeling of discontentment and of emptiness. In order to fill this emptiness, the individual and the nation constantly find new ways for progress and expansion. At the same time external obstructions and an internal exhaustion of energy cause the collapse of the individual and the nation [...] The second element the West can learn from the East is all-round and all-embracing understanding or wisdom [...] Wisdom is needed to comprehend and to deal with all the unprecedented changes of life. The Western world is in great need of this wisdom ... (Mou et al. 2000, 550–55)

From this perspective, “the West”, being idealistic and mechanical, is unable to understand changes, unable to understand life: while what the authors of the *Manifesto* meant by “life” was a cultural and moral life, it would be easy for later Confucians like Tu Weiming to give to this idea an environmental twist and elaborate (without coining it as such) the narrative category of “Brown Occidentalism”.

“Brown Occidentalism” is the application of (negative) Occidentalism to environmental issues: it goes with the idea that “the West” in general is responsible for all our current climatic and ecological issues (global warming and loss of biodiversity), i.e. essentially non-green or intrinsically “brown”:

Anthropocentrism in Western society is dominant [...] Western society adopted strong anthropocentrism. The decisive socio-historical influences put forward are: Ancient Greek philosophy; the Judeo-Christian tradition; the mechanistic thought of the Renaissance/ Reformation; ... [...] A dominant anthropocentric worldview is a barrier to ... humanity as a whole reaching an ecologically sustainable future. (Washington et al. 2021)

The problem with demonizing (so-called) “Western culture” for “our” past environmental evils and eulogizing (so-called) “Eastern wisdom” for “our” future ecological salvation is that it is de-socializing and de-historicizing the Anthropocene. Such a culturalist approach to the Anthropocene makes us unable to understand when and why the Anthropocene started and what are its sociological underpinnings (notably regarding the links between ecological harms and economic inequalities, see Oxfam 2015). Moreover, at the cultural and historical levels, it should be common sense that linking the Anthropocene with Plato or Augustine is rather preposterous for a civilizational process emerging after the Industrial

Revolution. Regarding Western Europe, one needs to remember that the medieval economy was notorious for its low ecological footprint precisely because it was dominated by Christian principles of frugality. In contrast to the claim that the so-called “traditional Western idea of the division between soul and body” caused ecological degradation, it was during the anti-Cartesian, anti-Platonic, and deeply secularized 19th and 20th centuries that massive environmental disruptions occurred. Negative environmental Occidentalism, i.e. “Brown Occidentalism” and positive environmental Orientalism, i.e. “Green Orientalism” (both concepts being our own coining) show how cultural essentialism is altering our reading of the current global environmental crisis: importing into environmental debates the trend of culturalizing global issues.

Understandably, such an emphasis on “culture” can be very appealing for cultural studies scholars and satisfy their deterministic idealism (“ideas are ruling the world”). However, the notion that the superstructure-ideology named “culture” can transform the infrastructure-economy named “development” seems so un-Marxist that we may wonder how it can be so specifically Chinese. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since it reveals both the depth of Marxist Sinicization (Xu 2012; Rockmore 2019) and the lasting impact of the late Qing self-strengthening movement. The notion of Ecological Civilization and its claim about the necessary “turn to the traditional Chinese culture for a correct guideline in our modernization” can be understood as the “greening” of the old saying: “Chinese learning for fundamental goals; Western learning for practical means”. Buruma and Margalit rightly stressed the Occidental nature of this project and its delusional ideology:

So the nineteenth century Chinese establishment scholars found an ingenious formula: Western knowledge for practical matters, such as weaponry, and Chinese learning for spiritual and moral affairs. It was a hopeless undertaking. You cannot separate one kind of knowledge from another, cannot import what is merely utilitarian while keeping out the potentially subversive ideas that go with it. ... Misguided or not, the classification of Western knowledge as purely practical confirmed the notion of a cold and mechanical Occident. (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 38–39)

One cannot create coal plants and cars on the basis on the *Analects* or *Yijing*; like it or not, for that and most of the industrial outputs that contributed to alleviating poverty in China due to its massive manufacturing sector one needs Newton, Clausius, Boltzmann, Poincaré, and so on. By which we don’t mean “Western science”, but modern science as such. No amount of Laozi will be able to absorb

the CO₂ emitted by Chinese factories to propel the export economy feeding the military building up of the nation. The science of industrialization as well as its detrimental environmental effects know no border and do not belong to any national culture. Brown Occidentalism is the idea that development in its negative environmental consequences is culturally “Western” and economically “capitalist”, while development in its positive social consequences (such as: alleviating mass poverty) is specifically Chinese and necessarily “socialist”. The positive and negative outcomes of the same process receive different cultural labelling depending on the political motives of the narrator.

Ecological Civilization and Green Self-Orientalism

Second, the concept of Chinese Ecological Civilization should be understood in relation to the broader culturalist assumptions according to which “the essence of the Asian ethos is ‘a holistic harmony’ in contrast to the European inclination to dualistic individualism” (Sakamoto 2002) and “traditional Chinese culture stresses the unity and harmony of nature and man.” (Zhang 2004, 14). For Lu Shuyuan, the edification of an “ecological spirituality” (*shengtai jingshen*) is necessary for the Chinese to re-appropriate everything that was lost during the process of modernization (and Westernization) in China (Lu 2001).

In this regard, the notion of “self-Orientalization” (coined by Arif Dirlik) may be even more appropriate than the notion of Occidentalism to characterize such a culturalist self-identification: “While [...] the term Orientalism has been used almost exclusively to describe the attitudes of Europeans toward Asian societies, I would like to suggest here that the usage needs to be extended to Asian views of Asia, to account for tendencies to self-Orientalization” (Dirlik 1996). Self-Orientalization is in itself a naïve and tragic attempt to protect oneself from the transcultural hybridization coming with globalization: naïve because one cannot protect “our culture” from globalization when our economy is an integral part of it; tragic because, on the pretext of resisting “foreign hegemony” it contributes to homogenizing internal cultural diversity and solidifying domestic social control:

Culturalist essentialism, regardless of its origins in the state or with intellectuals, serves to contain and to control the disruptive consequences of globalization. This has been the case also with the Confucian revival, in which Confucianism appears, on the one hand, as a dynamic ideological force in the development of capitalism, and, on the other hand, as a value-system with which to counteract the disruptive effects of capitalist

development [...] The assertion of ‘Chineseness’ against this uncertainty seeks to contain the very dispersal of a so-called ‘Chinese culture’.... This strategy of containment is the other side of the coin to the pursuit of a ‘Chinese’ identity in a global culture. (Dirlik 1996)

If it is true, as Rey Chow contends, that the promotion of “Chineseness” is based on the claim of one’s own “naturalness”, then the concept of Ecological Civilization is the logical expression of the PRC’s Green Orientalist and Brown Occidental narratives:

In the habitual obsession with ‘Chineseness,’ what we often encounter is a kind of cultural essentialism—in this case, sinocentrism—that draws an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world. Everything Chinese, it follows, is fantasized as somehow better—longer in existence, [...] more valuable, and ultimately beyond comparison. [...] The Chinese that is being constructed is [...] a nonmimetic, literal-minded, and therefore virtuous primitive – a noble savage. (Chow 2000)

The green (self-)Orientalist narrative of Chinese Ecological Civilization is both a way to put the blame for environmental degradation on the culture of the Other (associated with industrial modernization) and to produce an exotic alternative for a Western audience by encapsulating heterogeneous classic texts into an attractive sino-packaging. And there is no denying of the fact that it convinced some Western scholars, as evidenced by Scott Slovic’s statement (Gaffric and Heurtebise 2013):

What is unique in China are the core elements of environmental reverence that were articulated many centuries ago by Chinese philosophers and poets and are remembered even today in the twenty-first century. When we speak today of the emergence of an ecological civilization in China, we are, in a sense, referring to a re-assertion of traditional Chinese values rather than the creation of entirely new concepts, vocabularies, or attitudes. (Slovic 2013)

Green Orientalism and Brown Occidentalism go hand in hand: if it’s Oriental then it’s green, if it’s Western, then it’s brown—such an *a priori* opposition channels our reading of texts and analysis of reality in an uncritical way. It seems thus all the more necessary to methodologically deconstruct and qualify the “culturalist” claims entailed by the discourse of Chinese Ecological Civilization.

Philosophical Deconstruction of Ecological Civilization

First, it should be remembered that, as Robert P. Weller said, “‘Nature’ and ‘environment’ entered the Chinese vocabulary in their modern forms only early in the twentieth century ...” (Weller 2006, 4). This is not to say that it is not possible to find in Chinese classical texts, especially in Daoism and Neo-Confucianism, many elements that can positively contribute to enrich our understanding of “man and nature” relationships. Many of Zhuangzi’s sayings can be read in this way:

The people have their constant inborn nature. They are one in it and not partisan, and it is called the Emancipation of Heaven (命曰天放 – *mìng yuē tiān fàng*) [...] In this age of Perfect Virtue men live the same as birds and beasts, group themselves side by side with the ten thousand things. (Zhuangzi 2013, 66)

However, giving to Zhuangzi’s ideal description of human life an environmentalist dimension may be anachronistic: Zhuangzi’s aim was less to condemn technological progress (the Industrial Revolution, as we know, started more than two thousand years later...) than to criticize Confucian moralists who wanted to refine human mores through the observance of numerous social rituals.

For Zhuangzi, “virtue” will come spontaneously to all those acting in accordance with 天/Tian. However, we should remember that this word has many meanings: Heaven, Sky, Nature, Destiny, etc. In the above-mentioned 2015 *People’s Daily* article, to anchor the principle of Ecological Civilization in Chinese classical texts, it is said: “2,000 years ago, Zhuangzi issued the statement ‘Tian and Men are One’, meaning, at its core, that we should live in harmony with nature” (*People’s Daily* 2015). However, Sinologists know that “Tian and Men are One” (*tiān-rénhéyī*) cannot be found in Zhuangzi’s writing. But, more importantly, interpreting “天”/“Tian” in an environmentalist way seems rather misleading.

Let’s note that post-colonial critics have long insisted upon the fact that the missionary understanding of Tian as God was a kind of Orientalism. It is argued that since “Tian” is “uniquely Chinese”, and thus by virtue of the culturalist principle of dichotomic essentialism, it *can’t* be related in any way to a “Western” concept (such as monotheism). However, such a statement is rather problematic. First, it’s rather nonsensical to call monotheism “Western”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are Oriental religions. Moreover, the tendency to attribute personal feeling and volitions to God can also be observed in the pre-Confucian notion of Tian surfacing in the *Odes*: “Revere the anger of 天/Tian” (Legge 1970, 503)⁴; “天/Tian,

4 詩經, 大雅, 蕩之什, 《板》 § 8: 「敬天之怒」.

in giving birth to the multitudes of the people / To every faculty and relationship annexed its law.” (Legge 1970, 539).⁵ Maybe one can admit that the interpretation of Tian as meaning God is an expression of Eurocentric orientalism. However, in this case we should also admit that interpreting Tian as meaning environment is as an expression of Sinocentric self-orientalism. It seems rather more likely that what Taoists meant by *tiānrénhéyī* was not really to live in harmony with “nature” as we understand it today, i.e. meaning the Earth, but to follow the “law” of the “Universe”, the “Dao” that allows us “to ride the clouds and mist, straddle moon and sun” (something rather extra-terrestrial). Such anachronistic interpretations create an erroneous feeling of continuity contradicting classic texts’ meaning in their original contexts. Eric Nelson in *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy* is right in “acknowledging the perils of conflating ancient teachings of Dao and modern environmentalism” (Nelson 2020, 16). It is possible to have an environmentalist *reading* of Taoist sources without postulating that they always had an ecological *meaning*. Avoiding this hermeneutical fallacy is essential if we don’t want to fall into the culturalist trap of the “postmodern” narrative of an inherently Chinese Ecological Civilization.

Historical Deconstruction of Ecological Civilization

Second, even if it were true that classical Chinese texts could have an environmentalist meaning, the reverse assumption, that such texts cannot be found in the Western tradition, is erroneous. To demonstrate that the claim that the holist conception of man/nature interactions is uniquely Asian is not true, it will be enough here to quote the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* (X, § 6): “let this first be established, that I am a part of the whole which is governed by nature.”

The idea of an anti-ecological nature of Western thinking mostly comes from Lynn White’s 1967 “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, contending that our current ecological crisis is due to the influence of Christianity on European modes of living: “modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature” (White 1967). The notions that God is above nature, that nature is not divine, that God has created the world and its animals for the sole purpose of human use are, according to White, the cultural roots of the European’s will to exploit “nature” in an unsustainable fashion. Needless to say, this thesis has been widely discussed (LeVasseur and Peterson 2017) and

5 詩經, 大雅, 蕩之什, 《烝民》 § 1: 「天生烝民、有物有則」.

often harshly criticized, notably by James Nash, who notes that such a claim tends “to reduce the explanation of the complex ecological crisis to a single cause, [...] to minimize the fact that non-Christian cultures also have been environmental despoilers, [and] to overlook the number of dissenting opinions in Christian history” (Nash 1991). The weakest point of White’s argument lies in the historical fact that the development of the Industrial Revolution coincided with the gradual secularization of Europe. It can thus also be argued that it is not the influence of Christian ideas but their gradual disappearance that made unsustainable industrial capitalism possible.

Indeed, as Marx and Engels pointed out, by inducing the decomposition of all social ties except selfish greed, industrial capitalism led to a mass process of “deculturation”, paving the way to the unsustainable exploitation of nature:

The bourgeoisie has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations [...] and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest [...] The bourgeoisie has created more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, [...] clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground. (Marx and Engels 1975, 482–83)

Thus, it’s not the “Western quality” of economic development that makes it unsustainable, but the fact that capitalist modernity induced a global process of deculturalization affecting the West itself.

Finally, even if it were true that classic Chinese texts anticipated contemporary environmentalism, even if it were true that such an awareness of the importance of man/nature interactions were absent from the European tradition and that’s the reason why unsustainable development occurred, the notion that Chinese *civilization* is (or has always been) ecological does not fit with historical records. China has always placed the colonial development of the empire and the intensive exploitation of conquered lands above any other “ecological consideration”: “According to historical records, vegetation destruction occurred nationwide and frequently in preindustrial China” (Fang and Xie 1995); “From 1650 to 1949 the area of cropland generally increased, while the forest cover decreased. Over the long history, approximately half of cropland expansion came from deforestation in China” (Miao et al. 2016). Not only was massive deforestation caused by extensive rice cultivation already a concern in Imperial China (Elvin 2004) but, during the Maoist period, the Great Leap Forward also promoted man’s conquest of nature (人定勝天 – *réndìngshèngtiān*) and engaged in deforestation to plant

grain (开荒种粮食 – *kāihuāng zhòng liángshí*) (Shapiro 2001, 9–10).

It should also be noted that, until recently, Asian leaders considered environmental regulations as a means used by “Western powers” to limit their development: “to many Asian leaders, Western concern for areas such as human rights and the environment is often seen as unwarranted interference at best and as revealing ulterior motives at worst” (Han 2003).

Sociopolitical Deconstruction of Ecological Civilization: Eco-Panopticon with Chinese Characteristics

Third, as Zhang Wei noted, the Chinese concept of ecological civilization can be traced back to the works of American ecologists, from Aldo Leopold to Roy Morrison (Zhang, Li and An 2011).

This is an interesting departure from the official genealogy of the concept (Gare 2012; Rodenbiker 2020). According to the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment (2012), the concept was developed by economists from the USSR in 1984. The first academic publication in Chinese was authored by Zhang Jie in 1985 (Zhang 1985), and then the concept was developed by the Chinese economists Ye Qianji and Liu Sihua (Huan 2016).

The term “ecological civilization” in English was coined by Roy Morrison in a book entitled *Ecological Democracy*, in which he states: “an ecological civilization is built on three independent pillars: democracy, balance and harmony” (Morrison, 1995, 12). Differing from Ophuls, who contended in 1977 that “the only solution is a sufficient measure of coercion” (Ophuls 1977, 150), Morrison stressed the fact that “democracy” is an essential component of any sound and fair “ecological civilization”, since it requires the free participation of citizens and their ability to voice their concerns against developmentalism.

If “balance” and “harmony” can be easily linked to the PRC’s “harmonious society”, the term “democracy” reveals that the political dimension of ecological civilization has been largely overlooked by the official interpretation of the concept, emphasizing only its culturalist and neo-Orientalist aspects.

In this sense, the Chinese ecological civilization should be understood through T. W. Luke’s theoretical framework of “Green Governmentality” (Luke 1995). According to Luke, there are two problems with the conventional notion of the environment. First, the environment is not outside human society, but it is human society which is inside the environment. Second the trouble with “environment” is that it is not only a noun but a verb, not only a fact but an action: “In its original

sense, [...] an environment is an action resulting from, or the state of being produced by a verb: ‘to environ.’ And environing as a verb is, in fact, a type of strategic action. To environ is to encircle, encompass, envelop, or enclose” (ibid.). In this sense, the environment is the product of environmentality defined as the series of statements, predictions, and policies through which human beings are trying to regulate and discipline their own actions with regard to nature in order to preserve their abilities to continue to exploit it in the future. Environmental policies are more an attempt to discipline the capitalistic exploitation of “nature” than an attempt to protect “nature” for its own sake.

To understand Luke’s concept of geopolitics, it is necessary to go back to Foucault’s concept of biopower. For Foucault, biopower is the new form of political control that emerged in the age of biology, medicine and statistics:

By [biopower] I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. (Foucault 2007, 16)

Biopower means that what the state started to control is the population (aggregate of people) as defined in bio-medical terms: birth-rate, longevity, health status. Luke’s concept of geopolitics extends Foucault’s biopower:

The individual human subject of today, and all of his or her unsustainable practices, would be reshaped through this environmentality, redirected by practices, discourses, and ensembles of administration that more efficiently synchronize the bio-powers of populations with the geo-powers of environments. (Luke 1995)

Geopolitics refers to a new kind of control whose target is not human demography but natural resources, and whose aim is not to avoid epidemic diseases but the scarcity of material goods. Human life and social labour are becoming less important than the Earth’s resources and energy production: a new kind of paradoxical individual behaviour (“consuming responsibly”) is imposed on human beings in a society framed by growth-compatible environmental exigencies.

The Chinese notion of *shentai wenming*, by focusing on the technical and administrative aspects of environmental policies, by excluding civil society’s direct

engagement with ecological issues, could be read as an *Eco-Panopticon with Chinese characteristics*. Such statements should not be understood as being merely critical—on the contrary, they intend to be descriptive. Anne-Christine Trémon, in her paper about the development of Shenzhen, demonstrated clearly how Chinese Ecological Civilization has become a way to enforce urban policies which further deplete the rural environment while silencing local protests:

The particularity of Shenzhen is that it was created in a rural territory transformed overnight into a special economic zone. [...] by urbanizing all these villages in 2004, the Shenzhen authorities prepared the ground for a takeover of these villages, stigmatized because of their rural past. Urbanization now had to be green, that is to say based on an intensified use of space. Cooperative urban renewal projects become residential tower construction programs in the name of ecological civilization. (Trémon 2022; our translation)

Archaeology of Western Intellectuals' Need to Believe—Beyond Postcolonial Heideggerianism

Usually, the history of Western representations of China is divided into two periods: the “Sinophilia” period during the 17th and 18th centuries and the “Sinophobia” period during the 19th and 20th centuries, with a shift occurring at the end of the 18th century. Many scholars have noted this change: “The turning point is sudden and decisive [...] In the aftermath of the French Revolution, it would not occur to anyone to refer to China to think about the future of institutions” (Crépon 1993, 13; our translation); “As is well known, disenchantment with things Chinese began to take over in the second half of the eighteenth century” (Luca 2016, 180). This turn is particularly noticeable in Germany, moving from Leibniz’s and Wolf’s representations of China to those of Kant, Hegel and Herder: “Leibniz was still guided by the idea of mutually beneficial cooperation between two coequal scientific worlds. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a one-sidedly imperial outlook had come to prevail” (Osterhammel 2018, 208); “Leibniz places Chinese culture on a higher or at least an equal level to Europe [...] Herder portrays China as the biggest failure in the course of the history of humanity” (Zhang 2008).

Different explanations of this turn have been provided. One framework of explanation that seems to be readily usable is the post-colonial narrative provided by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In his 2013 paper “Chinese Influences or Images?”, Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen divided the Western study of China into two major

periods. The first moment is an answer to 19th century “Sinophobia”: countering discourses about European supremacy and Chinese backwardness from Hegel to Weber, reception studies demonstrated the impact of Chinese learning on European modernity. Key writings in this context are Adolf Reichwein’s 1925 *China and Europe*; Virgile Pinot’s 1932 *La Chine et la formation de l’esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)*; Joseph Needham’s 1956 *Science and Civilisation in China*; Basil Guy’s 1963 *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire*; and Donald E. Lach’s 1965 *Asia in the Making of Europe*. The second moment of 20th century Chinese studies is opened by Said’s *Orientalism* in 1977, whose immediate impact was to replace the study of the influence of Chinese learning on Europe by the discourse of the European imperialist framing of Asian realities. In this new framework, the question of “Chinese sources” (and their universalist re-evaluation) gave way to the issue of “European constructs” (and their relativist deconstruction):

in the 1980s [postcolonial studies] became the mainstream tendency for Sinologists and historians concerned with Enlightenment thinkers to interpret their preoccupation with China as a construction of an ‘other’ represented by an ‘image,’ rather than understanding the Chinese sources as a full-fledged part of European intellectual history. (Gaarsmand Jacobsen 2013)

The main idea of Said’s *Orientalism* is that Western accumulation of knowledge about the Orient did not aim at knowing but rather dominating it: “modern Orientalism has been an aspect of both imperialism and colonialism” (Said 1977, 123). Many scholars thus adopted the concept of Orientalism to analyse Westerners’ representations of China. For example, Daniel Vukovich in his *China and Orientalism* contended that: “Sinology itself must be seen as part of the long history of imperialism, colonialism, and trade. Thus, this knowledge formation must be understood as a part of historical colonialism and its *mission civilisatrice*” (Vukovich 2013, 5). However, there are important limitations to the use of “Orientalism” in Said’s sense of the term to define modern Western’s representations of China as a whole.

First, if the reference to Said’s *Orientalism* to frame Western views of Asia and China is misleading, it’s because, as “critics have pointed out [...], Said’s ‘Orient’ is focused on the Arab world and excludes most of what Westerners mean by the word” (App 2010, viii). However, there is an essential difference between the Western perception of the Chinese world and the Western perception of the Arab world: because the European perception of the Arabic Orient has been over-determined by the conflict between Christianity and Islam during the Middle Ages, it started with a rather negative background. Conversely, the Western perception

of China has been for a long time largely positive, starting from Marco Polo's narrative of the marvels of Kublai Khan's court before reaching its climax in 18th century *Chinoiserie*: "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, very many Westerners saw China as at least the equal of Western civilization in important respects" (Gregory 2002, 2).

Second, if Said's concept of Orientalism cannot really explain the shift in Western perceptions of China, it is because Sinophobic views started to prevail even before the 19th century, and thus cannot be attributed to colonialism:

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the dominant course of Sinophilia shifted toward Sinophobia [...] [However] European imperial encroachment on China did not start until the 1840s with the first Opium War. In particular, Germany [...] did not [...] have imperial ambitions. In the 18th century, European trade with China was almost exclusively conducted on China's terms. (Zhang 2008)

Finally, the idea that Sinophobic Orientalism determined all European representations of Chinese culture and framed academic Sinology can be further proven wrong by the fact that two leading scholars of Chinese studies in France expressed very critical views about the colonial enterprise and the development of the British Empire in Asia. Chrétien-Louis-Joseph de Guignes' 1808 *Voyages à Peking* criticized British colonial practices in China (Abbattista 2017), while Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat directly opposed Eurocentric Orientalism in his 1828 *Nouveau Journal Asiatique* paper republished in his 1843 posthumous works: "we call him an Asian, an Oriental, and that eliminates the need to know more; a precious faculty, a decisive advantage, which generic words provide to those who do not hold to correct ideas, and who, in order to judge, care little to go into depth" (Abel-Rémusat 1843, 225; our translation).

In this regard, we need a new framework of analysis. Instead of dividing the European reception of Chinese sources into two periods (Sinophile and Sinophobe), we will divide this history into three phases: Similarity, Subalternity, and Alterity (plus another one which is slowly emerging).

From medieval times to 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese realities were framed in terms of Similarity: "Medieval European travelers admired the Yuan Mongols and Han Chinese and their civilizations, perceiving more similarity than difference between themselves and the peoples of Yuan China" (Phillips 2014, 186), and "Among eighteenth-century travelers, freedom from prejudice is equated with fairness toward foreign manners and an impartial detachment from one's own" (Osterhammel 2018, 176).

The intellectual atmosphere changed after 1740 (in part due to 1743 Anson's trip and Montesquieu's 1748 *Esprit des Lois*). European intellectuals of the 18th and 19th centuries looked at "Chinese learning" from the point of view of Subalternity: "after 1770, [...] China's association with the Rococo, the French and the Jesuits made it an anathema for early romantic writers" (Marchand 2009, 23). Examples of "Chinese realities" being framed by a Subalternity mindset are numerous in the 19th century. In Germany, Hegel (1971, 173)⁶ stated that everything related to Geist (Art, Morality, Knowledge) was alien to the Chinese mindset; in France, Evariste Huc (1879, 174)⁷ said that Chinese were unable to abstract away from the material and mundane; in England, Smith (1894, 82–83)⁸ said that the Chinese language was incapable of expressing ideas.

In reaction, in the 20th century Alterity started to frame the West's relation to "the Chinese Other", either in the form of an Occidentalist fatigue about "Westernness" à la Spengler (1991, 185, 379)⁹ or in the form of a neo-exotic hope for "Sino-salvation" à la Malraux (Malraux 1926, 205)¹⁰.

This trend for Alterity was reinforced by what we will call "the Heideggerian turn of Chinese studies" and the adoption of the "Western onto-theology" narrative: Heideggerian ideas according to which "Being" is essentially a Western category (1983, 46)¹¹ differentiating "us" (the rightful heir of "Logos") from "them" (1988, 252),¹² and the notion that "East" and "West" speak different "languages"¹³ have

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- 6 "Dies ist der Charakter des chinesischen Volkes nach allen Seiten hin. Das Ausgezeichnete desselben ist, daß alles, was zum Geist gehört, freie Sittlichkeit, Moralität, Gemüt, innere Religion, Wissenschaft & eigentliche Kunst entfernt ist." (Hegel 1971, 173)
 - 7 "Le Chinois est tellement enfoncé dans les intérêts temporels, dans les choses qui tombent sous les sens, que sa vie tout entière n'est que le matérialisme en action." (Huc 1879, 174)
 - 8 "We are not about to complain that the Chinese language cannot be made to convey human thought [...] (though this appears to be a truth), but only to insist that such a language, so constructed, invites to 'intellectual turbidity'." (Smith, 1894, 82-83)
 - 9 "It is this extinction of living inner religiousness, ... in which a mankind loses its spiritual fruitfulness forever [...] Unfruitfulness ... marks the brain-man of the megalopolis [...] In the form of democracy, money has won." (Spengler [1922] 1991, 185, 379)
 - 10 "Voici presque deux ans que j'observe la Chine. Ce qu'elle a transformé d'abord en moi, c'est l'idée occidentale de l'Homme." (Malraux 1926, 205)
 - 11 "Ist das Sein ein bloßes Wort und seine Bedeutung ein Dunst, oder birgt das mit dem Wort ‚Sein‘ Genannte das geistige Schicksal des Abendlandes?" (Heidegger 1983, 46)
 - 12 "Denn auch der große Anfang der abendländischen Philosophie kam nicht aus dem Nichts, sondern er wurde groß, weil er seinen größten Gegensatz, das Mythische überhaupt und das Asiatische im besonderen, zu überwinden, d. h. in das Gefüge einer Wahrheit des Seyns zu bringen hatte und dies vermochte." (Heidegger 1988, 252)
 - 13 "Zumal für die ostasiatischen und die europäischen Völker das Sprachwesen ein durchaus anderes bleibt." (Heidegger 1985, 107)

deeply influenced post-1980 Sinology. “*Onto-culturalist Sinology*” thus became the dominant form of scholarly discourse about China. In short, Alterity as an academic framework for the analysis of Chinese sources goes with the *a priori* assumption that nothing which can be said about “the West” (Being, Logos, Pólemos) can stand for China, and nothing which can be said of China (Becoming, Mythos, Datong) can also be true for “the West”.

Recently, attempts have been made to escape this Heideggerian/Occidentalist trap. These allow us to understand retrospectively that, by denouncing the Orientalism of classical Sinology, post-colonial critics have been covering up the very Occidentalism of contemporary Sinology (Ames 2016). As Slingerland’s *Mind and Body in Early China* rightly pointed it out (2019, 1):

The resulting potent cocktail of French theory and cultural essentialism currently holds a surprisingly large swath of Asian and comparative cultural studies in its grip [...] while the negative side of such cultural essentialism has been singled out and rejected as pernicious Orientalism, its normatively positive manifestation [i.e. Occidentalism] has continued to flourish [...] from Granet straight down to ... Roger Ames, Henry Rosemony Jr., and François Jullien in the West, as well as Zhang Xuezhong or Tang Yijie in Chinese-language scholarship.

Thus, the critic of Chinese Ecological Civilization is not only the critic of a concept but also a critic of its rather uncritical reception by some scholars moved by the religious craving for non-religious alternatives that have partly framed the reception of Chinese sources since Voltaire. There is indeed no huge difference between Voltaire’s idealization of Chinese culture (which he claimed ignored irrational myths and superstition) (Voltaire, 1766, 90¹⁴, 57¹⁵; Voltaire 1779, 56¹⁶) in his attempt to demolish the Catholic Church and contemporary scholars’ enthusiastic reception of Chinese Ecological Civilization in their mission to atone for the sins of “Western colonial modernity”. Both are manifestations of “critical” intellectuals’ need to believe.

14 “When these people write, they write reasonably.” (Voltaire, 1766, 90)

15 “Their religion was simple, wise, august, free from all superstition and all barbarity, ere we had yet.” (Voltaire 1766, 57)

16 “The Chinese have not, like other nations, any superstitions, or any quackery, to reproach themselves with.” (Voltaire 1779, 56)

Conclusion: Addressing the Death Drive of the Mis-Anthropocene

Maybe Western intellectuals have never been totally able to cope with the loss of faith, and thus have always been looking for alternatives to the Christian transcendent salvation. For us, this is the main reason behind what Mark Lilla called the “philotyranny” of 20th century intellectuals from Heidegger to Derrida (Lilla 2001). Not much has changed since the 18th century intellectuals the most critical against the Church (Diderot, La Mettrie) embraced “enlightened despotism” and rushed to the court of Frederick the Great (Prussia) or Catherine the Great (Russia). Intellectuals’ faith in culturalist narratives, feeding existential voids with exotic gods, appears to be very conducive to both philotyranny and green-red-washing (according to Doyle (2021): “These advocates of Daoism are not just tertiary political players, however, but include President Xi Jinping himself”).

This is why we are still pious. Sartre famously said in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*:

If God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. [...] What man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself. (Sartre 1948, 29)

The fact that Heidegger suggested at the end of his life that “only a God can save us” (Heidegger 1993b) is very telling—it’s the same need for faith which led him toward National Socialism. Sartre himself would prove unable to keep to his own words, as testified by his feverish embrace of first Stalinism, and then Maoism. Rimbaud was more accurate when in a late poem, bidding “farewell” after a “season in hell”, he wrote: “One must be absolutely modern. Never mind hymns of thanksgiving: hold on to a step once taken. A hard night! Dried blood smokes on my face, and nothing lies behind me but that repulsive little tree!” Nothing left of “nature” but a little tree scarcely hiding our collective guilt – for which the religious search for cultural scapegoats (“Western dualism”) or cultural savours (“Chinese wisdom”) is nothing but a self-delusional way to avoid the contemplation of the abyss of human nature.

Wanting to save humanity from the trap it is setting for itself by degrading its own conditions of life seems rather illusory. If the world as it is pushes humanity to its loss, it is because there is not much in it (in its current form) to be saved. If

the business-as-usual economic model led to the irreversible degradation of soil and pollution of water, it is because the survival of “humanity” in the sense of the perpetuation of an aberrant state of affairs may not be the goal, but rather the satisfaction of unlimited needs with finite resources is emptying the Earth without filling the soul. *There is no need to save a humanity that wants to be lost, there is to “save” humanity from its desire to be lost*—to quote Jean-Luc Nancy:

Nothing is more common than the death drive—and the point is not whether the state technological policies that enabled Auschwitz and Hiroshima unleashed such drives, but rather whether humanity too heavy with its millions of years has not chosen for several centuries the path of its annihilation. (Nancy 2008, 55; our translation)

As Spinoza said, the only way to thwart a desire is to produce a stronger one. The only thing that can surpass the desire to lose oneself (Thanatos) is the desire to find oneself in the other (Eros). The only way out from our current Thanatocene fuelled by the competition between superpowers pretending to have a monopoly on the course of history is to arouse a “life drive” whose impulse and strength is exceeding the death drive in order to foster an Erocene of links and contacts among “Earthbound people” (Latour 2017, 255).

Ultimately the issue with the Anthropocene is not about “the relation of human to nature” but about the relation of humanity to himself. The Anthropocene refers to the moment where humans recognized that their domination over “nature” is also the instrument of their own demise. One could have hoped that man acknowledgement his influence on the planet as a whole (Steffen et al. 2011) could have given way to a shared feeling of terrestrial belonging. However, that the Anthropocene means that humanity in general is responsible for climate change has been criticized by social-scientists: it’s not humanity in general but a small portion of it that is responsible for global ecological disruption. But the least we can say is that there is no agreement about naming this “evil portion” of humanity that needs to be “overcome”: the Male (Androcene), the Rich (Capitalocene), the White (Racialocene), British and American Empires (Anglocene), the West (Colonialocene) the non-Aboriginal (Sedantarocene)?

To settle this highly polemical issue we need to de-culturalize and re-historicize the Anthropocene: according to most scientists today, the Anthropocene arose with the post-1950 “Great Acceleration” (Steffen et al. 2015). This refers to the era of US hegemony, Western decolonization, market globalization and the rise of Asia (Japan, China, India). In other words, the Anthropocene started when the colonization of the Earth ceased to be the privilege of one region of the

world, the “West”, and started to be available to the Global East and South. The Anthropocene is the name of our era in which every country is developing to its utmost in a race towards global or regional supremacy. It is linked to global geopolitical antagonisms: the Cold War between the US and the USSR marked the first Great Acceleration; the current Cold War between the US and the PRC is marking the second Great Acceleration, leaving us no chance to get out of it without deep civilizational harm. The fact that Western countries are responsible for most of past CO₂ emissions is today largely counterbalanced by the fact that Asian countries are responsible for most of the current and predicted such emissions.

Furthermore, the post-colonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly stressed that a more equal distribution of emissions among all nations would have changed nothing about our current environmental crisis, except making things even worse:

Only a few nations (some twelve or fourteen, including China and India in the last decade or so) and a fragment of humanity (about one-fifth) are historically responsible for most of the emissions of greenhouse gases so far. [...] Historically speaking, it is, of course, true that the richer nations are responsible for most of the emissions of greenhouse gases as they pursued models of development that produced an unequal world. But imagine the counterfactual reality of a more evenly prosperous and just world made up of the same number of people as today and based on exploitation of cheap energy sourced from fossil fuel. Such a world would undoubtedly be more egalitarian and just – at least in terms of distribution of income and wealth – but the climate crisis could be worse! [...] Humanity’s current predicament renews for the humanist the question of the human condition. (Chakrabarty 2021, 57)

This is why reading the Anthropocene through the lens of an “East and West on-to-cultural divide” and along the lines of Green Orientalism and Brown Occidentalism narratives is so misleading. This is also why a transcultural approach to the Anthropocene is necessary. What is needed is to stress not the cultural specificities of a place but the universality of our terrestrial belonging: “In a context of rapidly increasing connections around the globe, what is crucial for ecological awareness and environmental ethics is arguably not so much a sense of place as a sense of planet” (Heise 2008, 55). This is the main problem with the culturalist interpretation of environmental threats: it contradicts the eco-cosmopolitan requirements of environmental ethics today and could become an obstacle to the international resolution of environmental issues, as “environmental dangers pose supranational problems; these need solutions to which national governments are not well suited” (Yearley

1991, 45). Only a transcultural environmental ethics can cope with the global nature of risks we all face in the age of the Anthropocene (Mayer 2016).

By transcultural we mean neither intercultural nor cross-cultural: neither the rational dialogue between cultures nor their empirical hybridization and capitalistic mixing up, but the unpredictable meeting of what in each culture is transcending its own “cultural specificity” and linguistic boundaries. Transcultural environmentalism is not about going back to “past wisdom about nature”, but is the creative result of cultures accepting that their national identity is challenged by the universality of our ecological predicament. There is no way out without reinventing a transcultural notion of the universal.

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***Fengshui*: A Moral Technique-Art (*jiyi* 技藝) for Contemporary Environmental Awareness**

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Abstract

In this article, we will define *fengshui* as a contemporary hybrid way of thinking with a long history that unfolds from ancient Chinese philosophy and the art of ruling, through Song Neo-Confucianism, to modern Western ecologic interpretations. We will particularly highlight the cosmological and moral *ratio* of this art in the philosophical thought of Zhu Xi and Cai Yuanding, which we will propose as the possible source of a renovated moral *fengshui*. After this historical framework, we will present the process of the scientification of *fengshui* as a building technology. Therefore, we will put into question this enframing of *fengshui* as a modern technology through both Heidegger's lens and Li Zehou's definition of "proper measure" (*du* 度). Following this hermeneutical analysis, we will propose *jiyi* 技藝 (technique-art) as the most suitable definition of *fengshui* and we will present the ethical dimension behind it (i.e., filial piety towards nature). In the conclusions, we will argue that *fengshui* is not, properly speaking, an environmental philosophy or an ecologism, since these two concepts are too rooted in Western philosophical culture (i.e., transcendence and the separateness of humans and nature). However, we are convinced that *fengshui* could fruitfully contribute to a deeper ecological awareness with a Chinese character on both the local and global scales.

Keywords: *fengshui*, Zhu Xi, Cai Yuanding, Martin Heidegger, deep ecology, environmentalism

***Fengshui*: Moralna tehnika-umetnost (*jiyi*) za sodobno okoljsko zavest**

Izvilleček

V tem članku bomo podali definicijo tehnike *fengshui* kot sodobnega hibridnega načina razmišljanja z dolgo zgodovino, ki sega vse od starodavne kitajske filozofije in umetnosti vladanja, preko sunškega novokonfucijanstva, vse do modernih zahodnih ekoloških interpretacij. Predvsem pa bomo poudarili tovrstno kozmološko in moralno *racionalo* v filozofski misli Zhu Xija in Cai Yuandinga, ki jo bomo obravnavali kot možni vir prenovljene moralne tehnike *fengshui*. Zatem ko bomo podali ta zgodovinski okvir, bomo predstavili proces poznanstvenjenja tehnike *fengshui* kot gradbene tehnologije. Prav

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zaradi tega bomo pod vprašaj postavili uokvirjenje omenjene tehnike kot moderne tehnologije, tako skozi Heideggerjev pogled kot tudi Li Zehoujevo definicijo »prave mere« (*du* 度). Za to hermenevitično analizo bomo predlagali *jiyi* 技藝 (tehnika-umetnost) kot najprimernejšo definicijo pojma *fengshui*, predstavili pa bomo tudi etično dimenzijo v njenem ozadju (tj. sinovska pietetnost proti naravi). V zaključkih k tej razpravi pa bomo zagovarjali, da, v svojem pravem pomenu, *fengshui* ni niti vrsta okoljske filozofije niti oblika ekologizma, saj imata ta dva koncepta svoje korenine v filozofski kulturi Zahoda (tj. transcendenca in ločenost človeštva od narave). Kljub temu pa smo še zmeraj prepričani, da lahko *fengshui* bogato prispeva h globlji ekološki zavesti s kitajskimi značilnostmi, tako na lokalni kot tudi globalni ravni.

Ključne besede: *fengshui*, Zhu Xi, Cai Yuanding, Martin Heidegger, globoka ekologija, environmentalizem

Fengshui and Its Hybrid Nature

We start our investigation with a balanced definition of *fengshui* 風水, as provided by the Korean scholar Yoon:

Geomancy [*fengshui*]¹ is a rather complicated, quasi-scientific, quasi-religious Chinese art built on the concept that humanity can benefit from nature only when humanity chooses an auspicious environment and uses it appropriately. One environment is more conducive to fortune than others, according to geomancy, and nature provides environments ranging from highly auspicious to highly harmful. (Yoon 2006, 155)

He adds that the environment presents “magical” and vulnerable forces that humans have to detect, protect, and accumulate in order to benefit from them. The relation between humans and the environment is based on responsiveness (*ganying* 感應), since both are manifestations of *yinyang* 陰陽 (or better *qi* 氣). We see in this definition, proposed by Yoon, the limits of the use of Western terminology. Quasi-scientific and quasi-religious are terms that suggest that it is neither of these disciplines, but also not the opposite of them. Yoon is reclaiming the “scientificity” of this knowledge in order to suggest a specific rationality of this art, without the implications of what we label “modern science”. He is suggesting that *fengshui* is religious in so far as it penetrates deeply into the spirituality of

1 In this article we do not make use of the translation of *fengshui* as geomancy, since there is no corresponding term in Western languages for this concept. The term geomancy could correspond at the most to the mere applied face of *fengshui*, the superstitious one, precisely what we are not concerned with in our argument. In the third paragraph, we will discuss the use of terms such as art, technique, and so on.

the community, but does not entail any transcendental God and religious order. These “quasi-definitions” express the impossibility of representing in Western languages an art that is a quintessential expression of Chinese culture. We also need to consider that *fengshui* presents two faces—the divination of sites for the dead and for the living—which creates a unique art that has developed from very practical needs (i.e., the identification of a dry safe and above all liveable site).

Fengshui is the specific historical result of the convergence of ancient theories and arts that date back to the origin of Chinese civilization, such as divination, cosmology, astrology, numerology, topography, etc., following the principles of the most relevant Chinese schools of philosophy (i.e., Daoism, *Yinyang* correlative thinking, interpretations of the *Yijing* 易經, Confucian relational ethics, etc.²). All the philosophies and arts involved could be gathered under the general blanket term of “the art of ruling”, whereby ruling the cosmos (with its supernatural forces), ruling nature, and ruling humans, are understood as three aspects of the same task. As David J. Nemeth (1991, 215–16) clearly explains, since the origin of Chinese and Korean civilizations, the most fundamental governing rule was the “centrequest”. Chinese rulers re-enforced their authority in placing themselves at the centre of the universe, where the cosmic forces are at their apex and create a harmonic flux. The cultural geography of ancient and imperial China is scattered with places where these forces gather and give access to the power of *qi* 氣. These places are temples, shrines, royal/imperial palaces, and royal/imperial tombs (ibid., 216), but to this we can also add natural elements, such as mountains, large stones, rivers, etc. This quest, at the origin a prerogative of the ruling clans, gradually became popular and spread among the common people.

The term 風水 *fengshui* emerged only in this period of popularization, when the Confucians of the Song inaugurated an intense interest in cosmology and the ethical speculations on the 易經 *Yijing*. This is also when the art of the *fengshui* became a profession for men who were paid for their consultations. Before the Song dynasty, this art was named differently in each epoch and context (占卜 *zhanbu*, 相宅 *xiangzhai*, 堪輿 *kanyu*, 地理 *dili*, etc).

As with any Chinese art or technique (數術 *shushu*), *fengshui* possesses a canon of texts, but several of the most ancient ones are either lost or highly manipulated. One of the pivotal figures of ancient times is Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324 AD) of the Jin dynasty, the attributed author of *The Inner Chapter of the Book/Classic of Burial Rooted in Antiquity* (*Guben zangjing neipian* 古本葬經內篇), where he

2 Ever since the Song dynasty, Buddhism has also played a relevant role in the shaping of this art, both cosmologically and ethically (e.g., dependent origination, charity for the deaths and the livings, and so on).

refers to a quasi-lost ancient tradition that needs to be restored. Most of the texts of this canon have been written or reworked since the Song dynasty. This makes *fengshui* a very ancient art—due to its cultural roots and early references—and at the same time a recent one, since it possesses a canon that continued to develop from the Song to the end of the Qing dynasty. Meanwhile, the definition of this canon is still a rather open process, where Western and Chinese sociologists, anthropologists, and architects³ continue to play a relevant role beside the “popular experts” of the discipline (from spiritual leaders to fortune-tellers). This creates what we can acknowledge as a true “transcultural system of thought”, where the origins or the presumed traditional purity are completely undetectable (if not irrelevant). The *fengshui* we know today is thus the product of a long process of adaptation and manipulation, at first within Chinese cultural history, and afterwards on an international scale.

As noted above, *fengshui* is an art with an extremely hybrid nature, since it absorbed elements coming from each of the most relevant philosophical schools. From Daoism, it inherited cosmology and divination (i.e., the theories of 氣 *qi* and 陰陽 *yinyang* which were mostly developed within this school). From the interpretation of the 易經 *Yijing*, it took numerology and symbolism as effective means of interpretation of the cosmos. From Confucianism, it absorbed concepts such as the relevance of the dead for the living (i.e., the cult of one’s ancestors as roots) and the necessity of social hierarchy for cosmic order (with its inextricable rituality 禮 *li*). As Eitel (1984, 51) already suggested in 1873: “the history of the leading ideas and practices of Feng-shui is the history of Chinese philosophy”.⁴ This is not because *fengshui* is *stricto sensu* a philosophy, but because it gathers elements from each of the Chinese philosophical thoughts.

The Confucian systematizer Zhu Xi 朱熹 openly endorsed the efficacy of *fengshui*, particularly regarding the correct selection of appropriate locations for imperial tombs. He was a close friend of Cai Yuanding 蔡元定 (1135–1198), a geomancer of the relevant Cai lineage from Fujian. It is reported that when Zhu wrote a memorial to the throne, requesting a more appropriate place for the corpse of the recently deceased emperor, he was deeply influenced by Cai’s explanations of the principles of *fengshui* (Ebrey and Walthall 2014, 142). He shared the idea that a correct burial could bring positive energy to the descendants of the deceased, and he inserted this view within his cosmological understanding (Ebrey 1997, 86–105). He was perfectly aware that many of his colleagues despised *fengshui* as

3 We note here that philosophers are almost absent in the list of scholars who devote attention to *fengshui*.

4 Quoted in Bruun 2008, 14.

a pseudo-science or, as we would say, a superstition, and that this could be used against him. However, he firmly supported both the moral necessity to have one's parents' corpses properly buried, and the possible good fortune that the correct performance of this ritual could entail.

In his *Family Rituals* (*Jiali* 家禮), he quotes the harsh critics of Sima Guang 司馬光 towards the incoherence and inefficacy of geomantic burial, particularly with regard to the large amount of time necessary for divination of the site and for the complex burial rituals (see Ebrey 1997, 92; 1991, 103). He also quotes Cheng Yi 程頤, who, while rejecting the excessive insistence on fortune and misfortune of the “Yin-yang specialists” (i.e., the *fengshui* experts), completely agrees with the need to find a “a land that is excellent” for tombs. Below we present some of Cheng Yi's ideas in order to better situate Zhu Xi's point of view:

When the land is excellent, the spirits will be comfortable and the descendants will flourish; the principle is the same as the branches and leaves of a plant flourishing when dirt is banked around roots. [...] It is land that is bright and moist; a flourishing growth of plants and trees is the evidence. [...] Father and grandfather, son and grandson, all share the same material force (*ch'i*). According to this principle, when the one is at peace the other will be at peace; when the one is endangered the other will be endangered. Adherents of superstitions are deluded into selecting the direction of the land and choosing days for their auspiciousness. Isn't this ignorant! The worst do not think in terms of serving the deceased but worry solely about their own future benefits. This is not what a filial son should be concentrating on in arranging a burial place. (Ebrey 1991, 105)

To these dense arguments by Sima and Cheng, Zhu Xi laconically adds: “the ancients decided on grave sites and burials dates by divining with stalks. People today do not know these methods, so it is all right to follow the customary way of selecting these”. The “customary way” is clearly *fengshui*, as he made explicit in his memorial. He clearly argues: “In recent times the method of divining with stalks has been lost but theories of how to select sites still exist. [...] Although this is the theory of the experts (術家 *shujia*), it is not without a rational basis” (Ebrey 1997, 88–89). He compares the art of *fengshui* (here named *dili* 地理) with medical practices such as acupuncture and moxibustion, because a wrong site is like a wound that has not been correctly cauterized. Ebrey (1997, 92) comments that for Zu Xi, “stripped to its core, geomancy fits within the cosmology of the *I-ching*, which includes the geomancers' favorite classical allusion: ‘Look up to observe the patterns of heaven; look down to examine the principles of earth (仰以觀於天文，俯以察於地理)’”. This line, which became a *fengshui*

motto, comes from the *Xici zhuan* 繫辭轉,⁵ the most philosophical of the “Ten Wings Commentaries” to the *Yijing* 易經. We find in this expression *tianwen* 天文 (celestial patterns) and *dili* 地理 (principles of Earth), two terms to which we will return later. We can summarize that Zhu Xi saw divination as both a way to penetrate the organismic model of *li* 理 and *qi* 氣, and as a kind of effective ritual (*li* 禮), one that is able to preserve the energetic and moral forces within a lineage.

Beside Zhu Xi and a few other supporters,⁶ *fengshui* was mostly criticized by Confucian scholars because of the complex (and expensive) process of burial and the low (i.e., unconventional) education of the *fengshui* practitioners. However, it was largely used for selecting sites for both tombs and houses, mostly by unlearned people during the Ming and Qing dynasties, though there are investigations which prove that *fengshui* was also used for urbanistic purposes, such as placing temples—particularly Buddhist ones—around cities.⁷

In the 19th century, the fiercest enemies of this Chinese art were no longer the Confucian scholars, but the foreign missionaries or entrepreneurs whose building projects on Chinese soil were met with constant rejection from the imperial authorities on the grounds of going against the principles of *fengshui* (mostly after complaints by ordinary people). As Ole Bruun (2011, 47) reports, *fengshui*, which was officially despised—when not forbidden—by the institutions, served as an “ideological weapon” against foreign expansion.⁸ Nevertheless, it is precisely in this same period that *fengshui* became an emblem of Chinese backwardness. It was acknowledged as pure superstition by foreign missionaries, a view which was endorsed by modernist thinkers and nationalist authorities alike. *Fengshui*, which was most often openly practiced in the countryside, was the symbol of the persistent influence of religion and scientific ignorance in this land. In the 1920s, the rising enthusiasm for science and technology led to an anti-superstition movement, crowned by the 1929 promulgation of the “Procedure for the Abolition of the Occupations of Divinations, Astrology, Physiognomy and Palmistry, Magic and Geomancy” (ibid., 76). In short, the cosmological factors were gradually losing their role in the exercise of power, and thus interest in any cosmological activity also faded among commoners. Since the early 1950s, the same rejection was confirmed by the Communists in their rejection of any folk or uninstitutionalized religious faith. During the Cultural Revolution, geomancers

5 We consulted *Xici shang* 繫辭上, 4 on <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/xi-ci-shang/zh>.

6 For instance, the Qing scholar Shen Hao supported the Form School against the Compass School, and he reproached his colleagues for not studying *fengshui* but leaving their parents’ tombs in the hands of unlearned and rustic geomancers (see March 1968, 263).

7 Of particular interest are Li Liu (1998) and Freedman (1968, 6).

8 See also March (1968, 253–55).

were forced to confess their backwardness and were beaten in public. Only with the “Open Door Policy” of Deng Xiaoping were old family graves restored, and new ones “geomantically” established. The media was still banned from promoting *fengshui* but, as Bruun (2011, 108) reports, when the first book on the subject was published in 1989–1990, it was perceived as the opening of a new phase for this ancient art. However, we think it is very likely that this new wave of interest was inextricably connected to the Western interpretation of *fengshui* among scholars, and is mostly devoted to the identification of good sites for the living rather than the dead.

In the same decades of when the Maoists banned all talk of *fengshui*, Western scholars such as Maurice Freedman and experts in *fengshui* such as Stephen Skinner devoted their efforts to making the subject better known in the West as an ecological way of thinking that was necessary for the whole of humanity. In his influential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1968, Freedman (1968, 13–14) defines *fengshui* as a “mystical ecology”, and explains that “what men construct is an intrusion, and geomancy is preoccupied with the problem of allowing men to build what they need and want without destroying their natural relationship with the cosmos”. He adds that “Fêng-shui is the ritual of a society not yet overborne by its architectural technology”. Both Freedman and Skinner proposed a re-evaluation of *fengshui* as a global philosophical way of thinking, producing a reflection that aimed to convert it into an effective transcultural phenomenon, deeply influenced by the ecological or environmentalist sensibility, which was already on the rise in the West at the time. For Freedman (1968, 14), *fengshui* was the alternative to the “ferocious dominion” over nature of Western modernity.

Despite the long century of persecution in China, *fengshui* is still vital in both urban⁹ and rural¹⁰ contexts. Indeed, *fengshui* has extended its influence to forest preservation,¹¹ farm organization, home décor, and tourism,¹² as well as in the shaping many important national buildings, such as Terminal 3 the Beijing

9 This article could not include a presentation of the “Shan-Shui city” project that belongs to the architect Wu Liangyong and was endorsed by the famous scientist Qian Xuesen; see Chen Yulin (2010) and Yang Yizhao and Hu Jie (2016, 14).

10 There are around 2,500 protected historical villages in China which respect the principles of *fengshui* and are surrounded by *fengshui* forests (see Madeddu and Zhang 2017).

11 See Chen Jianling et al. (2020); Chen Bixia et al. (2018); Yuan and Liu (2009).

12 We mention the two museums devoted to *fengshui* and classical architecture in the PRC, one in Sichuan (阆中古城风水馆 Ancient City of Langzhong Fengshui Museum) and a smaller one in Jiangsu (泰州中国传统建筑风水文化博物馆 Taizhou Chinese Museum of Classical Architecture and Fengshui Culture).

Airport, the Olympic Pool, and Terminal 2 of the Pudong Airport.¹³ The last three examples were influenced by the work of the Chinese *fengshui* experts He Xiaoxin 何曉昕 (who studied philosophy and anthropology) and Luo Jun 羅雋 (an engineer), both of whom are well known in the United Kingdom.¹⁴ We see that *fengshui* is certainly considered, often implicitly and sometimes overtly, in the building process. In fact, in the modern China of the early 2020s, a twofold cultural tension was in action: 1. The claim that after having reached the target of modernity there was a need to reject “superstitions” (迷信 *mixin*), among which *fengshui* is classified; 2. The quest for a specific form of Chinese modernity with both socialist and classical Chinese characteristics.

The revaluation of this wisdom since the 1980s is inextricably indebted to the previous readings of Western scholars, such as Freedman and his disciple Feuchtwang, who had the wisdom to reject the “superstition” and anti-scientific reading of *fengshui* and understood the deep roots of this art in Chinese society, particularly in Hong Kong, where it was not banned. As Feuchtwang (1974, 14) argues:

If I now say that *feng-shui* cosmology has the status of a model, is a self-defining metaphysical system, those analysts who condemned *feng-shui* as pseudo-science would still not reverse their judgement because they made their analyses from the models in which they believed, religious or Western scientific. But the model which is *feng-shui* was believed to be valid by its Chinese exponents, and it must, therefore, for Western Europeans and all others be recognized as having reality as a model by the mere fact that we believe the Chinese to be real.

He concludes that “*feng-shui* cosmology is eminently more about relationships than fixed entities; the phases of cosmic breaths and the interaction of elements may easily be and are in the manuals themselves personified into social phases and interactions” (Feuchtwang 1974, 255). On the basis of these investigations, the aforementioned He Xiaoxin could reclaim the dimension of *xuewen* 學文 (learning knowledge) for *fengshui* and its “not-scientific nature”.¹⁵ Our investigation is concerned with *fengshui* not as a superstitious folk practice aiming at obtaining good fortune—the one that was denounced by Confucians and the authorities from the Song dynasty on—but instead with this hybrid wisdom with

13 There are a number of projects that, more or less covertly, bend towards *fengshui* principles all around mainland China, particularly to ensure commercial success, see the Conclusions in Madeddu and Zhang (2017).

14 On their activities see Paolillo (2012, 136–38).

15 See Bruun (2011, 108) and Paolillo (2012, 136–38).

a rationale that merits philosophical investigation outside of a scientific evaluation. This is the reason for approaching the question of the “scientification” of *fengshui*.

The Scientification of *Fengshui*

At the opposite end of our philosophic quest, since the late 1990s, in order to reclaim the relevance of *fengshui* in architecture (both within the Sinosphere and on a global scale), a process of “scientification” of *fengshui* among experts of urbanism, sociology, and economics has taken place, producing a large number of books and articles. The motivation for this activity was the necessity to reject the definition of *fengshui* as superstition (both in China and the West), and instead to suggest the “scientific” nature of this system. This academic activity, which has its main centre at the School of Architecture of the City University in Hongkong, is based on a very old-fashioned comparative approach, with charts showing equivalences or similarities between (Western) science and *fengshui*.

Professors Mak and So are the founders of the International Conference series on “Scientific Feng Shui and the Built Environment”, and authors of several publications on this topic. Their approach, perfectly understandable through one of their most relevant monographs, *Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment* (Mak and So 2015), is based on the need to prove that China has a scientific stream of thought comparable with that of the West, and that *fengshui* is a science. They focus their attention on the theories and methods of the two main schools of *fengshui*, the one of Form and the one of Compass,¹⁶ in order to assess the validity of their principles. They have produced pages and pages of charts to provide a very solid and technical presentation of these methods, always looking at comparable Western building rules. And, in addition to their perfectly coherent explanations, they devote chapters to case studies from Hong Kong and around the world, with pictures of sites where *fengshui* principles have been used or can allegedly be detected. For them, this art is “a body of ancient Chinese wisdom encompassing

16 Both schools arose during the Song dynasty. The “School of Forms”—also named the Jiangxi School—is concerned with the divination of the influences of the forms of the natural landscape (e.g., mountains, hills, water courses, large stones, etc.) on buildings and graves. The “School of Compass”—also known as the Fujian School—derives from a combination of the divinations of the hexagrams of the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*) and of the magnetic compass (*luopan* 羅盤), and it studies the numerological interactions between directions and time that produce *qi* 氣 (i.e., the flow of energy). Despite the complexity of the numerology behind the magnetic compass, this technique was mostly used by the common people in the countryside as a pure technique, and only marginally concerned with natural forces.

knowledge and experience related to the built environment that has been accumulated for more than three thousand years” (Mak and So 2015, 2). They avoid terms such as geomancy, divination, and art, which are often used to refer to *fengshui*. They prefer “knowledge and practice related to the built environment” or “set of architectural theory and practice”.

Mak and So’s starting point is that *fengshui* needs to be investigated in two directions: “(a) the verification of *Feng Shui* principles scientifically and (b) the study of *Feng Shui* logically in a scientific way” (ibid., 3). It is evident from the beginning of their book that (Western) science is the standard of this analysis. They even devote an entire chapter to the definition of the scientific method as a form of systematic knowledge that is based on observation, experiment, and verification.

They admit that it is hard to experiment and test *fengshui* because its effects can be observed only over decades or even centuries. It is equally futile to use surveys—e.g., interviews or questionnaires—because people’s replies would certainly be influenced by their superstitious beliefs and ignorance about *fengshui*. It is almost case studies alone that can be used as examples of the efficacious application of the principles of this model. Within this chapter, where even (Western) logical principles are presented, the authors insert a paragraph on “correlation”. They specify that correlation is a non-experimental method, and they add that “the strength of correlation can be used when it is impractical or unethical to manipulate the variables” (ibid., 26). At this point they suggest that it is precisely this principle that offers the best way to study *fengshui*. A question arises almost spontaneously here—why is it necessary to investigate *fengshui* through science when it already emerges as a “weak science” on the first pages of the book? Furthermore, the book presents a perhaps contradictory aim that evokes an ambiguous feeling in the reader. On the one hand, the authors present Western science as the criterion of verification, on the other, they try to suggest that Chinese “scientific thought” possesses some original aspects that deserve attention. Science is at the same time the criterion of validity and a negative target. Therefore, after pages of imaginary comparisons, after proving the compatibility between *fengshui* and (Western) science, the authors suggest that Chinese thought proposes more harmonious and balanced principles than its Western counterpart—i.e., the Western built environment—which descends from the scientific method that served as the standard of their argument (ibid., 175).

More precisely, one of the major aims of Mak and So is to prove that *fengshui* is an “ecological sustainable design” science, hence they claim that the whole concept of sustainable design is based on the same principles of this ancient Chinese method. “Constructivism” (in this content the study of the interaction

between humans and the environment) is thus said to be equivalent to “the Unity between Heaven and Human” (the harmony of visible and invisible *qi* 氣), “circular design” (reduce, reuse, recycle) can be compared with “the five elements cycle”, “balance between the natural and built environment” with “Yin and Yang Harmony”, and so on (ibid., 147–52). We see that *fengshui* is reduced to a set of ecological techniques, extremely clear and (presumably) scientifically proven. The authors’ reasoning is thus based on a very questionable use of transitive properties. In other words, Western architecture, and specifically ecological sustainable design, is scientifically based, *fengshui*’s principles are perfectly compatible with this building method, and thus *fengshui* is, to some extent, proved as a science—we could say a very special science with Chinese characteristics. “The Western built environment methods of analysis are based on bioclimatic and sustainable models that emphasize climatic factors and interactions with natural environment. Whereas *Feng Shui* model is based on the balance and harmony between natural and built environment” (ibid., 175). Again, it is evident that *fengshui* is not properly reducible to a scientific method, but the necessity to free it from superstition drives the authors to accept it to be a “weak science” based on cosmological and philosophical principles that are somehow at the heart of the uniqueness of this Chinese building practice. Ironically, *fengshui* is reduced to a set of schematic building and urbanistic rules based on correlative cosmology—not science!—that are labelled as scientific, only to contest two centuries of criticism grounded on scientific and rational principles. Mak and So admit that *fengshui* is mostly a superstitious way of thinking for ordinary people in Asia, but they firmly believe that in creating very precise and well-defined charts of principles we could find the “true” (or scientific!) *fengshui*. Moreover, if their reductionist approach—based on a transitive property, as we noted—almost seems to work for the Form School (based on environmental observations), they fail to find any comparable Western principle for the numerology and flying stars of the Compass School.

In this scientific *fengshui*, the mystery of the forces suggested by Yoon is completely lost. The ethical reflection on the behaviour of humans, and how this can have positive and negative effects on selected sites, is completely absent. Fortune and misfortune are improperly interpreted as equivalent to the character of a built environment, and thus of being suitable or unsuitable for a comfortable life. Furthermore, divination for the dead (i.e., graves) is completely dismissed. We suggest instead that it is necessary to reject this approach and propose an interpretation of *fengshui* following Heidegger’s critique of technology as enframing, and Li Zehou’s analysis of the philosophical context of classical Chinese techniques.

Fengshui as a Technique-art of Proper Measure

Is *fengshui* a scientific technology? We can find a way of answering this question through *The Question Concerning Technology* by Heidegger (1977), where he discusses modern technology as the loss of the Greek concept of *technē*. *Technē* is a poietic act, a bringing-forth or unconcealment of truth (i.e., Being). According to the German philosopher, technology lost its capacity to unveil or reveal truth (*alētheia*) and, instead, now challenges nature to meet the insatiable human demand for energy. This challenging reduces nature to a “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) of resources. This process is what Heidegger terms enframing (*Ge-stell*),

the unconcealment in accordance with which nature presents itself as a calculable complex of the effects of forces can indeed permit correct determinations; but precisely through these successes the danger can remain that in the midst of all that is correct the true will withdraw. (Heidegger 1977, 26)

In the enframing, natural forces are reduced to coherent, calculable, and exploitable resources. Nature becomes pure order. Therefore, modern technology loses the capacity to reveal, and rather cancels the Truth. The philosopher closes his essay by suggesting the arts as the most effective act of revealing, which the Greeks indeed called *technē*.

Reading the history of *fengshui* through the lens of this argument is quite compelling. *Fengshui* arose as an art of revealing, a *shushu* 數術 or 術數 (i.e., technique) or a *technē* in Heidegger’s lexicon. It is both an art and a technique founded on the observation of the natural order and its laws expressed through numbers. To express *fengshui* we also propose the compound *jiyi* 技藝 (technique-arts), which is used in the *Book of the Later Han* to describe the extraordinary ability of the polymath Zhang Heng 张衡 (78–139) as “his imperturbable loyalty and honesty were his leather belt, a complex of technique-arts his adornments [on the belt]”.¹⁷ This is to say that morality was the bone of his nature, and technique-arts were the visible expressions and beautiful products of it.

It was only with the Song dynasty that *fengshui* became a folk activity aiming at ensuring fortune and exploiting the “supply” of good energy provided by one’s ancestors. The moral act of choosing the right gravesite was perverted into a “market” of recipes for obtaining economic success. *Fengshui* thus underwent an effective process of enframing, from which it emerged as an unlearned superstition

17 “辯貞亮以為鞶兮，雜技藝以為珩。”(Hou Hanshu 後漢書，張衡列傳 17). Retrieved from CTEXT. We note that *jiyi* 技藝 is a written variant of *jiyi* 技藝.

(*mixin* 迷信). However, the philosophical interpretation of a systematic thinker such as Zhu Xi reveals the authentic reason behind *fengshui*—the cosmological resonance that finds its expression in a moral ritualistic application. In our opinion, the contemporary attempt to present *fengshui* as a Chinese science follows the same principles of enframing. For both the believers in “superstitious *fengshui*” (i.e., it is a belief that ensure success)¹⁸ and the supporters of “scientific *fengshui*” (i.e., it is a Chinese building science based on observation and correlation), this technique is merely a means of enframing nature thanks to very rigid and reassuring norms based on a cause-effect chain. The profound penetration of nature in *fengshui* is thus downgraded and reduced to a set of conditions and actions. In this section, we aim to re-evaluate or pose again the question of *fengshui* as *technē*—i.e., as a revealing technique-art—when it is inscribed in a socio-cultural context where human morality and acts respond to natural forces and *vice versa*.

While commenting on Heidegger’s essay on technology, the Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui (2021, 123) argues:

There are truths that cannot be demonstrated, yet that also cannot be judged to be untrue. [...] We have called this the non-rational, which had to be distinguished from both the irrational and the rational. The irrational is antagonistic with the rational. The irrational can be demonstrated as false, but the non-rational is beyond the realm of demonstration. [...] Art as cosmotechnics is founded on an epistemology of the non-rational, which Heidegger sometimes refers to as the Unknown, the incalculable, or the last god. The non-rational is therefore non-dualist since it cannot be identified with either the rational or the irrational. It is a third term that is beyond phenomenal truth.

This comment is extremely compelling for our argument although we do not agree on two points. First, to define what it is beyond “Western rationality”—that of modern science—as non-rational, instead of irrational, does not create room for a new intercultural understanding and maintains a “negative-definition”¹⁹ close to the “quasi-definitions” presented by Yoon. In our view, we should either propose a new label/term, less associated with a Western, negative vision of other civilizations or disciplines outside science, or localize the rationality—e.g., Chinese rationality, Western rationality, Poetic rationality, Artistic rationality,

18 Oh Sang-Hak (2010, 143) speaks harshly of “egoistic vulgar belief” that he distinguishes from the “thoughts of the land” that were appreciated by some Korean intellectuals of the Joseon Period.

19 We understand that Hu likely has in mind the privative alpha of *alētheia*, but this definition does not escape the boundaries of the opposition rational-irrational, and, in our case, West-East.

etc.—in order to create a more neutral field of interaction between diverse instances. This second choice could be more fruitful in contesting the presumed universality of (Western) rationality. Furthermore, what Hu terms the non-rational is not necessarily beyond phenomenal truth, but instead is beyond (Western) modern scientific analytical investigation. *Fengshui* is strictly phenomenal, but it proposes a vision of phenomena—whereby natural and human ones are not separated—that is grounded in correlation. According to Zhu Xi and Cai Yuanding, humans should harmonize with the natural forces that they can detect in the landscape, and through moral acts attract the respect of the ancestors and nature itself. However, humans will never possess them. Therefore, we appreciate Hu's reclaiming of "other logics"—i.e., Greek tragic logic and Daoist logic—although we do not agree with the term "non-rational." *Fengshui* is grounded on a logic which works properly if applied into a web of natural and moral relations, something that is eloquently explained by Li Zehou.

One of the most renowned and consistent arguments by Li is about the origin of Chinese thought—and more generally culture—from the "Shamanistic-Historical tradition" (*wushi chuantong* 巫史傳統). According to his understanding, the identity of the ritual (*li* 禮) as a principle of regulation, at the base of the triad religion-ethics-politics, descends from the character of the shamanistic experience (and still maintains most of its character). The philosopher identifies four elements of this tradition that had a dramatic impact on Chinese culture. These are *yinyang* 陰陽 (that he understands as the interrelation of active-inactive in the act of possession), the five processes or *wuxing* 五行 (that descend from the perception and intuition of mutual resonance between humans and things/world), *qi* 氣 (the vital energy of Heaven and Earth as well as the force of humaneness), and, finally, proper measure or *du* 度 in Chinese (Li 2018, 50–53). For our investigation on *fengshui*, this last aspect is particularly fitting. The proper measure represents the correct movements of the shamans necessary to positively welcome and communicate with the spirits. Li explains that "it cannot be communicated or explained in terms of logical thought or analytical cognition, but rather can be acquired only through operation and practice. It is said that 'the subtlety of operations exists within one's heart-mind'" (ibid., 52). The proper measure is at the base of any Chinese cultural context, everything is connected to *du*. *Du* is the reasonableness (*helixing* 合理性) of the *jiyi* 技藝 (technique-arts) or *yishu* 藝術 (arts), such as the art of ruling, the governing of ourselves, the art of art (*yishu de yishu* 藝術的藝術), the art of life, the art of cooking, the art of tea, etc. Li Zehou marginally refers to *fengshui* in his writings (mostly in interviews), however, he presents—besides *bushi* 卜筮 (divination)—*tianwen* 天文, *dili* 地理 and *jishu* 技

術 as the core of shaman's ancient Chinese system of competences (Li 2015).²⁰ It is indisputable that under the flag-term *dili* (which is certainly not geography in this context), the divinatory art of *fengshui* needs to be included, and, actually, this was one of the names of this technique-art. *Fengshui*, as at least an aspect of the macro-discipline of *dili*, is a technique-art (*jiyi*) of the observation and application of the reasonable principles of *yinyang*, *wuxing*, *qi* and proper measure (*du*).

We believe that Li Zehou's distinction between rationality and reasonableness is more appropriate than Yuk's non-rational. As Li explains: "rationality serves as universally applicable public reason and modern social morals, while reasonableness is connected with emotions and therefore has greater flexibility and is closely aligned with my notion of pragmatic reason" (Li 2018, 247). Technique-arts are based on emotions (i.e., the heart-mind), experience, observation, practice, and adaptability.

According to Heidegger, the art of building—as with all activities which belong to *poiesis*—is an act of revealing, of unconcealment of Being, not merely a technique that makes the world orderable, objectifiable, and exploitable (Heidegger 1977). Technologies objectify the world and reduce beings to *not-beings*, concurring to the oblivion of Being. In the Chinese cultural discourse, techniques (*shushu* 數術 or *ji* 技) and technique-arts (*jiyi* 技藝) are the *xingerxia* 形而下 gateway to the *dao* 道 or *li* 理, which is seen as pertaining to the *xingershang* 形而上. *Dao* does not correspond to Heidegger's Being, *dao* is singular—the cosmic *dao* that precedes the one (i.e., Laozi, 42)—and multiple—*tiandao* 天道, *rendao* 人道, *wangdao* 王道, *daode* 道德, etc.—and does not imply the idea of the primordial or origin, it is devoid of any kind of historical necessity or eschatological perspective (see Ma 2006, 156). Therefore, in Heidegger's understanding *technē* reveals/unconceals Being, thus it provides room for a never complete revelation or manifestation of Being on the *holzwege* of human life. *Ji* 技 instead is the *xingerxia* 形而下 aspect of the *dao* 道, which is defined as unfathomable from the *xingershang* 形而上 perspective. Since *xingerxia* and *xingershang* are not the dualistic system immanent-transcendence, but rather two perspectives on reality, technique-arts present an aspect of the *dao* and do not simply unconceal *dao*, they are *dao* and participate to the harmonious living according to *dao*. Humans practice *dao*, they do not practice Being. Technique-arts—simply *ji* 技 in Zhuangzi's story of the cook Ding—are to be applied not as the aim of action—"What your

20 See particularly Li (2015, 44). In Li (2018) the term *dili* is improperly translated as geography. In several contexts Li uses the term for this modern discipline, but this is not the case in that context.

servant cares for is the *dao*, and ‘goes through/surpass’ (*jin* 進) technique”²¹—but as the practical exercise of nurturing life (*yangsheng* 養生). The cook practices the slaughtering of oxen as a classical dance or ballet (*wu* 舞), therefore, as an “art of self-cultivation”. The spirit (*shen* 神) that perceives the *dao* of things—in that case the flesh of the ox—and express itself in the “dancing activity” of the butcher is described by Graziani (2021, 29) as “the optimal efficiency of the body’s inner activity”, in perfect tune with Li’s argument on *du* (proper measure). Mere technique does not nurture life, while a technique-art that express itself through “artistic actions” grounded on sensibility, emotions and humaneness is able to penetrate and express *dao*.

The Moral *Fengshui* as a Technique-art for Interpreting the Cosmos

Despite what the understanding of *fengshui* as a scientific technique or a superstition might suggest, this technique-art presents an explicit moral frame. In fact, positive effects descend from the respect of natural forces and the moral behaviour of humans. Hong-Key Yoon (2006, 144–47) particularly insists on the fact that geomancy is strictly connected with conducting a moral life (such as conforming to Buddhist charity, Confucian filial piety, the principle of repayment for beneficial acts one has received, etc.).²² This concept of morality, as a force among natural forces, descends from the same master Kong who described virtue as *de* 德, a power of positively influencing our environment.

Everything is made of *qi*, namely, living beings, ancestors, sites, and (moral or immoral) actions. In *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of House Siting* (*Huangdi zhaijing* 皇帝宅經), we can read:

The entity *yin* is the mother which gives birth to and transforms the actuality of things, and the entity *yang* is the father. These are the ancestors of heaven and earth and the parents who nurtured them. If one obeys them there will be smooth passage. If one opposes them there will be adversity. How is this different from a duke, on being loyal, receiving (greater) title of nobility, or, on disobeying orders being put to death? (Paton 2013, 137)

21 “臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。” (Zhuangzi s.d., chap. 3). In Zhuangzi (2010, 46) it is suggested that the verb *jin* 進 should be interpreted as *chaoguo* 超過, this interpretation should date back to Cheng Xunying 成玄英 (monk Zishi 子實)’s commentary.

22 This analysis is based on a large collection of Korean popular stories taught within families, for generation after generation.

The technique-art of *fengshui* is equivalent to the act of obeying parents and the obedience of the king/emperor towards Heaven (*tian* 天). Humans must respect the configurations of *yin* and *yang*, which they can read within the shapes of natural environment. What *fengshui* proposes is a true *xiao* 孝 or filial piety towards nature (i.e. natural forces and humans). The *Classic* adds: “If man and site are mutually supportive, then there will be communication between heaven and earth” (ibid., 143). As for the parents (or superiors), there is a responsive relation. Humans respect nature and they gain fortune in return. Zhu Xi argues that this moral chain of caring for ancestors and having good fortune in return is a true “law of nature” (自然之理),²³ which we could also translate as “natural principle” (inscribed in his cosmological thought). Usually the Song philosopher uses the definition of “natural principles” to describe “ancient rituals” (*li* 禮), which were not constructed arbitrarily, but with an effective cosmological agent (see Sommer 2020, 537). As we already suggested, *fengshui* is an unavoidable ritual for him and is inscribed in nature. Zhu clearly separates the practices of *fengshui* that could be despised and seen as superstitious from the deep reasons and principles behind this technique-art. Correlation, natural responsiveness, ineffable forces, spiritual world, and a holistic vision are these natural principles.

This is elegantly argued in *Faweilun* 發微論 (About uncovering the secrets [of the landscape]) by the aforementioned friend of Zhu Xi—Cai Yuanding—who, in the closing chapter on *ganying* 感應 (resonance) writes:

Resonance is due to the way of Heaven [*tiandao* 天道]. The way of Heaven does not speak but responds with fortune and misfortune. A proverb says: “a good *yin* place [i.e., gravesite] could not compete with a good place in the heart”. These wise words perfectly express the principle of resonance. It is because of it that [the expert] who divines a good site must rely on the accumulation of virtue [of the deceased]. If his/her virtuous acts are abundant, Heaven will reply with a fortunate site and his/her descendants will obtain good fortune and conform to the luck of the site. If his/her actions are evil, Heaven will reply with a negative site, the evil will take roots in the hearts of his/her descendants and the unfortunate site will produce misfortune.²⁴

23 We consulted Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Shanling yizhuang* 山陵議狀 on CTEXT.

24 “夫天道，不言而響應，福善禍淫皆是物也。諺云：陰地好不如心地好。此善言感應之理也。是故，求地者必以積德為本。若其德果厚，天必以吉地應之，是所以福其子孫者必也，而地之吉亦將以符之也。其惡果盈，天必以凶地應之，是所以禍其子孫者亦本於心也，而地之凶亦將以符之也。” (Cai Yuanding 蔡元定, *Faweilun* 發微論). Our translation. For the translation of a few further excerpts from different sections of the text see Ebrey (1997, 94–95) (in the same essay the author offers some intriguing opinions on the relation between Zhu and Cai).

Heaven could but respond to the morality of humans, to their Ruist good/perfected (*shan* 善) behaviour. The shape and quality of sites that are chosen through divination correspond to the morality of the dead. Therefore, *fengshui* is not only about caring and sparing nature but also about human virtue, because these are inextricable factors/forces. A good site is chosen because of the morality of the people who have to dwell in this place. Likewise, the good site will influence the morality of the people who dwell on it.

Fengshui, as a divinatory technique-art, supports the “readability” of the mystery of nature. In ancient times it was named *xuanshu* 玄術, which certainly means mysterious art but also the art of the mystery. *Fengshui* is named the “terrestrial astrology”, that is, the art of reading signs of the natural forces on Earth.²⁵ As David J. Nemeth (1991, 228) writes:

Chinese geomancy is a system of divination because it reveals hidden knowledge about the location of the cosmic breath. [...] This indirect divination of heavenly phenomena through terrestrial indicators characterizes Chinese geomancy as terrestrial astrology, that is, astrology using a terrestrial medium.

In ancient times, where this art was a prerogative of the king or emperor, the energy to rule descended from Heaven through signs on Earth. Therefore, *fengshui* was the art of reading the celestial decree (*tianming* 天命) on the terrestrial surface and trying to benefit from this knowledge. Despite this art gradually losing its nature as an imperial prerogative, its hermeneutical power is not necessarily diminished.

The Chinese *fengshui* suggests a certain “readability” of the mystery. Humans cannot penetrate the mystery of Heaven, but they can read this mystery through its mirror reflection on Earth, as perfectly coherent within a correlative way of thinking. As Mou Zongsan could not accept the unreachability of Kant’s *noumena*, so *fengshui* supposes the penetrability of the essence (*li* 理). *Fengshui* is the technique-art devoted to understanding the *diwen* 地文, the terrestrial patterns, which are images of the *tianwen* 天文 (i.e., celestial patterns). *Fengshui*, as an art of *wen* 文 (i.e., reading patterns), is both an unveiling of the *dao* 道 of things and a good *dao* (i.e., way of life) for humans. Therefore, *fengshui* is an active hermeneutics of nature, which warns of exploitation of the environment and promises good fortune for those who (morally) regulate themselves according to its “reading”.

25 Bennett (1978, 1) speaks of an “astro-biological mode of thought”.

Conclusions: *Fengshui* and Ecologism

The *fengshui* specialist and anthropologist Ole Bruun grounded his critique of the acknowledgment of *fengshui* as an ecological thought on three pillars: 1. there are many counterfactual historical instances of its role in exploiting nature; 2. it is centred on man's search for personal advantage (i.e., family fortune), and, globally speaking, Chinese thought is intrinsically anthropocentric; 3. *fengshui* holism is very different from the moral and ideological transcendence of ecological thought (Bruun 2014, 176–78). In our view, the first observation is not valid because we could find in any philosophy or religion counterfactual instances of its efficacy, historical perversions of their core values, and so on. In the West, we do not suggest that the Christian faith is somehow more or less a valuable moral and spiritual wisdom because of the Crusades, the persecutions of heretics, the Inquisition, the market for indulgences, the sexual abuses of children perpetrated by priests, etc. When we analyse Western thought, we evaluate the theoretical contribution instead of the historical efficacy.²⁶ However, when we face non-Western systems of thought, the historical and practical instances often obscure the theoretical value. And we cannot neglect the fact that there are also instances of forest preservation in contemporary China thanks to the *fengshui* characteristics of the environment. Regarding the second point, Bruun clearly anthropologically investigates only what we named the “superstitious *fengshui*”. Meanwhile, he completely disregards the theoretical frame or cosmological *ratio* we tried to isolate through canonical philosophical texts, and which inscribes fortune in the ethical framework of filial piety. Fortune is the natural reward for our active respect in following human and natural *ming* 命 (i.e., destiny). It is undeniable that the popular historical instances of this art created a kind of “exchange market” between humans and nature, although the historical products of *fengshui* do not exhaust the possibility of this discipline. Regarding the third point, this objection is based on a very Western perspective, and is an expression of epistemic injustice. It is obvious that Western ecologism imbued with transcendental values provides a more coherent ethics in Western terms. Firstly, Christian thought is based on the idea of that the world and everything in it is placed at man's disposal (Genesis II. 8–20) and a clear separation between humans (made in the image and likeness of God) and nature. Secondly, the true life is in the next world. Humans are custodians of nature because nature is God's creation, and they are thus responsible for the well-being of all creatures. This is a radically anthropocentric and transcendental perspective.

26 The Enlightenment ended in the White Terror, Hegelianism supported colonial violence, Heidegger served as Rector of the University of Freiburg thanks to his support for the Nazi Party, and so on. Are the related philosophical contributions to be rejected because of their historical products, or should they instead be investigated for their theoretical qualities?

Therefore, we are puzzled when we read that “ecology itself, whether of a scientific or popular kind, combines reductionist science with morality towards nature and thereby sustains an overt or latent double bind to transcendence, whether of Christian, Buddhist or other cognitive origin” (Bruun 2014, 177).²⁷ The Buddhist perspective is holistic and the care for what is not the self is based on the accumulation of *karma*, and thus it is another anthropocentric and utilitarian perspective. It would be more correct to say that ecology is based on the separation between humans and nature, and that humans are seen as, in Heidegger’s terms, fatherly custodians²⁸ of a helpless counterpart. This perspective is, on the one hand, very empowering, however, on the other it is based on what Foucault terms the “technology of guilt” inscribed in Christian faith and institutionalized in modern Western societies. The perspective is inversed in the *fengshui* that we have examined in this paper, because humans are children who must respect the fatherly forces around them. Therefore, the Chinese perspective could also be traced back to the same moral principle: guilt. While the Western perspective is based on the idea of guilt in relation to a helpless inferior (i.e., nature), the Chinese view sees humans as respectful or unrespectful children of nature, as agents among agents. Furthermore, it is obviously true that Western ecologism is more pragmatic and effective than *fengshui* in preserving nature, but this is theoretically the wrong reasoning, because Bruun confuses “ecological activities”—i.e., effective measures and actions—with “philosophic ecologism”. The second creates ecological awareness and cannot be evaluated against effective activities. As Tu Weiming (2001, 256) writes: “while these principles, based on geomancy, can supposedly be manipulated to enhance one’s fortune, they align human designs with the environment by enhancing intimacy with nature”. Here, we could even say “family intimacy” with nature.

In our opinion, *fengshui* is not an environmental philosophy because it does not share the vision of nature and environment tacitly implied in this system of philosophy. In classical Chinese culture, there were three terms for nature: 1. *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity or self-so-ness); 2. *wanwu* 萬物 (the whole myriad things, humans included); 3. *tiande* 天德 (the cosmological moral order that consists of the triad *tian ren di* 天人地).²⁹ None of these terms corresponds to the Western concept of nature. “Nature” from the Chinese perspective is spontaneous and autopoietic,

27 We find ourselves more interested in the intriguing discourse on a renovated conception of “sacred place” connected to *fengshui* that Ole Bruun (2011) raised during the “International Conference on Feng Shui (Kan Yu) and Architecture” held on November 9–10, 2010 (among the organizers were the aforementioned Mak and So).

28 We refer to Heidegger’s (2010) reflection on dwelling.

29 See Nelson 2021, 10–11.

its logic is embedded and not transcendental (or analytical). Nature includes humans, is neither “the other” of humanity nor an object. Nature expresses a web of forces driven by an immanent moral power. Therefore, *fengshui* is neither a naturalism from a Western perspective, nor an environmental philosophy. However, we agree fully with Eric Nelson (2021, 56) when he argues, in his investigation into Daoism from an environmental perspective, that:

contemporary environmental philosophy, policy, and practice could enact a newly reimagined and interculturally renewed new Daoist ecological model by working with the natural tendencies in things toward restoring sustainable, functional, self-reproducing relational systems that constitute the asymmetrically shared body of life.

In the same way, *fengshui* is one of the Chinese contributions to the global discourse on the human-nature relation. As more than forty years ago Bennet (1978, 24) was already advocating, this technique-art “can serve as a vehicle for putting to right human dilemmas, thus generating group cohesion and harmonious interpersonal relations. In this way, siting might be said to have evolved into an all-purpose safety valve for Chinese society.”

In 1995, Bruce V. Folz published a book entitled *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature*, where he undertakes the first analysis of how Heidegger’s philosophy could contribute to environmental ethics. According to Folz, Heidegger’s conception of dwelling is a rare effective environmental ethic, because it is not driven by technology, economic interests, social managing, and so on, but instead by the mystery of living, by a respect for nature which humans are the stewards of, and not the final users. Instead, if we base ecologism on mere techniques, “such efforts would serve only to enhance the reign of technology by increasing its range while obscuring its pervasiveness” (Folz 1995, 166). As George Pattison (2000, 207), commenting on Folz, suggests: “Alongside ecology we need ‘deep ecology’, a spiritual re-orientation that will make us fit custodians of planetary good”. In fact, Heidegger does not provide an applied or practical philosophy of ecology, but rather an orientation towards effective questions concerning the relation between humans and nature as a whole (Pattison 2000, 210). In our opinion, *fengshui* can also provide a “deep ecological” way of thinking. “Deep ecology”, as we already noted, is defined by Pattison—in Heideggerian terms—as “the spiritual re-orientation that will make us fit custodians of planetary good” (Pattison 2000, 207). *Fengshui*, re-established in its cosmological and moral frame, could provide even a deeper perspective: the spiritual re-orientation that will make us good, filial children of the planet.

The influential philosopher Donna Haraway (2016) recently proposed that since we live on a damaged planet we should be inclined to sym-poiesis, or making-with, rather than auto-poiesis. We need to dwell in “Chthulucene”, as opposed to the Anthropocene, where the web of relations between humans and non-human beings is not hierarchical. A renovated *fengshui* could participate in the awakening of humans to being embedded in the cosmos and not owners of it. This is the only way to invert the current system of exploitation that is “ecosystem-destroying, human and animal labor-transforming, multispecies soul-mutilating, epidemic-friendly, corn monocrop-promoting, cross-species heartbreaking, feedlot cattle industries” (Haraway 2016, 109). This is an awareness deeply rooted in Chinese culture.

In conclusion, thanks to our and similar investigations *fengshui* could be re-established as a positive asset in contemporary Chinese culture, one that needs a new process of understanding, not as a mere technical instrument, but as a philosophy of responsiveness (*ganying* 感應) and of environmental respect, able to contribute to the “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming* 生態文明) project that still lacks a proper vision of the human-nature relation. For instance, in the Chinese “2021–2025 Five-Year Plan” several ecological and cultural measures are proposed. It is stated, for instance, that “it is mandatory to protect and strengthen the cultural context of the cities, to put an end to mass demolition and mass construction (*dachai dajian* 大拆大建), and to allow the cities to preserve their memories and the citizens to perceive homesickness.”³⁰ Furthermore, among the main aims of this plan we can find an increase in forest preservation—from 23.2% in 2020 to 24.1% in 2025—and in the prevention of floods in areas near coasts and rivers. These three actions could benefit from the cultural frame of *fengshui*. A specifically Chinese cosmological *ratio* could better motivate the emergence of a local natural sensibility. Miller (2001, 267) correctly observes that:

The problem is that either our worldview is local, and therefore parochial, narrow-minded, and divisive, or it is global, and therefore imperial and totalitarian. For this reason, countries that have experienced Western colonialism are rightly suspicious of being subject to a new form of Western hegemony in the form of global environmentalism.

A differentiation of environmental drivers—i.e., the outputs of different civilizations—could be a good practice for a renewed and effective ecological awareness worldwide.

30 “保护和延续城市文脉，杜绝大拆大建，让城市留下记忆、让居民记住乡愁。” (14th Five-Year Plan 2021–2025, chap. 8, sect. 29).

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Ecological Implications of the Logic of Non-Duality: An Analysis of the Plotinian One and the Daoist *Dao*

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between language and reality and the ecological implications of dualism, categorical logic, and the Aristotelian three laws of logic, on humans' attitude toward the natural world. The paper engages in a comparative analysis of two traditions: one from the West (Neo-Platonism) and one from the East (Daoism). It argues that while both Neo-Platonism (as represented by Plotinus' *Enneads*) and Classic Daoism (as represented by the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*) are successful in debunking rigid dualistic logic, Plotinus's Oneness emanation theory in the end falls short of supporting an inclusive ecological ethics in a comprehensive manner. Still mired in dualism, Plotinian Neo-Platonism treats nature and the physical world as recalcitrant matter—an evil best to be avoided rather than embraced. By contrast, Classic Daoism's non-dual multi-universe perspective of the world has much to offer with regard to creating a new eco-philosophy and ethics that supports a healthy, sustainable, ecology.

Keywords: Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Neo-Platonism, Daoism, nature, matter, emanation, non-duality, dualism, law of excluded middle, law of non-contradiction, law of identity, mutual production of opposites, water, female, ecology

Ekološke implikacije logike nedualnosti: Analiza Plotinovega enega in daoističnega *Dao*

Izvilleček

Članek raziskuje odnos med jezikom in resničnostjo in ekološkimi posledicami dualizma, kategorialne logike ter Aristotelovih treh zakonov logike na človekov odnos do naravnega sveta. Članek se ukvarja s primerjalno analizo dveh tradicij: zahodne (novoplatonizem) in vzhodne (daoizem). Trdi, da sta novoplatonizem (ki ga predstavljajo Plotinove *Enneade*) in klasični daoizem (ki ga predstavljata *Daodejing* in *Zhuangzi*) sicer uspešna pri razbijanju toge dualistične logike, vendar Plotinovi teoriji o emanaciji enosti na koncu ne uspe podpreti celovite ekološke etike. Plotinov novoplatonizem, ki je še vedno ujet

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v dualizem, obravnava naravo in fizični svet kot nepokorno materijo – zlo, ki se mu je bolje izogniti kot pa ga sprejeti. Nasprotno pa lahko klasični daoizem s svojim nedvojnimi večsvetnim pogledom na svet veliko ponudi pri oblikovanju nove ekofilozofije in etike, ki podpirata zdravo in trajnostno ekologijo.

Ključne besede: Aristotel, Platon, Plotin, Laozi, Zhuangzi, novoplatonizem, daoizem, narava, snov, emanacija, nedualnost, dualizem, zakon izključene sredine, zakon neskladja, zakon identitete, vzajemna proizvodnja nasprotij, voda, ženska, ekologija

“Being and non-being generate one another.” (Laozi, *Daodejing*, chapter 2)

“The One is everything and not everything.” (Plotinus, *Enneads* V.2.1)

“Everything must either be or not be [but not both].”

(Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 19a27-28)

Setting the Problem

Our linguistic framework, whether mental or verbal, affects how we perceive the self and the world, which in turn conditions our stance on the environment, gender, politics, and transnational relations. Thus, the relation between language and reality has important implications for ecology. Does language mirror reality as it really is? How far can linguistic-conceptual naming go? Is a binary, or a non-binary, paradigm better suited for capturing the ever-delicate balance between humanity and nature, self and others? The above brief quotations from three distinct traditions give us a glimpse of the complexity of the issue. On the one hand, we have traditions from the East and the West that challenge rigid binary thinking regarding being and non-being and the problem of categorical names. For example, in his discussion of the divine triads of the One, the *Nous*, and the World-Soul, the Neo-Platonist Plotinus writes, “The One is everything and not everything” (*Enneads* V.2.1, in O’Brien 1964, 106). He further adds, “The One, is not a being, for then its unity would repose in another than itself. There is no name that suits it really” (*Enneads* VI. 9.5 in *ibid.*, 80). In describing *dao* (the first principle of all that exist), the *Daodejing* 道德經, a Daoist classic, states “The *dao* named *dao* is not the constant *dao*. / Names can name no lasting names. (道可道非常道，名可名非常名。)” (Chapter 1, my translation). Similarly, the *Diamond Sutra* (*Jin Gang Jing* 金剛經, *vájra-cchedikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*), a Mahayana Buddhist text, expounds, “All characteristics are in fact no-characteristics (諸相非相)” (chapter 5, in Price and Wang 1990, 21) and “truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is not. (如來所說法，皆不可取，不可說，非法，非非法。)”

(Chapter 7 in *ibid.*, 24).¹ The Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gita*, 5: 3, teaches us that “Free from duality, [the practitioner] is easily liberated” (Johnson 2008, 23).

On the other hand, we have modern rationalist thinkers such as René Descartes (Cress 1993) and A. J. Ayer (1952), among others, who express their total confidence in reason and our language’s capacity to adequately convey meaning and truth as they are. Going back to the cradle of Western philosophy, we find that the conceptual root of binary thinking is already implanted in Aristotle’s three laws of logic: the laws of 1) non-contradiction, 2) excluded middle, and 3) identity. The law of non-contradiction states that contradictory statements about the same object/thing/event cannot both be true, a direct challenge to non-binary thinking. Symbolically, the law of non-contradiction is expressed as $\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$: it is impossible for p and $\sim p$ both be true at the same time. If p stands for the proposition “ X is A ” and $\sim p$ for “ X is not- A ”, then X cannot both be A and not- A at the same time; to be A and not- A at the same time is a contradiction. Aristotle expresses such a view in a number of places in his *Metaphysics*: e.g.,

the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect ... For it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says. (*Metaphysics* IV, 1005b19-20, 1005b23-24 in Aristotle 1941a, 736–37; see also IV, 1011b13-14 in *ibid.*, 749).²

Moreover, the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction implies the law of excluded middle, $\sim(p \cdot \sim p) \equiv (p \vee \sim p)$. There is no third term. This connection is made in his work on logic, *On Interpretation* 19a27-28 (Aristotle 1941b, 48). Furthermore, of the two propositions: “ A is A ” or “ A is not- A ”, because “ A is not- A ” is contradictory, “ A is A ” must be true. This leads to the law of identity: a thing is always identical with itself, namely, $(\forall a) (a=a)$. Aristotle regards these three laws of logic as *self-evident* axioms.

By contrast, Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek thinker with a noted idea of impermanence, who denied the laws of non-contradiction and identity in his famous river statements: “You cannot step twice into the same rivers” (Burnet 1920, 136); “We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not” (*ibid.*,

1 Chapter and page references are based on *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng* (Price and Wong 1990).

2 This version of the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction bears a striking resemblance to Plato’s statement in the *Republic* 436b7-8, where it says, “It is obvious that the same thing will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time” (Hamilton and Cairns 1987, 678) in his proof for the tripartite structure of the soul, that the soul has three distinct powers: reason, passion, and desire.

139). Other than Heraclitus, Aristotelian logic has also been questioned by Plotinus (founder of the Neo-Platonist School), by the Daoist, the Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, and by a number of contemporary philosophers of logic. Most notably in the past three decades, it has been challenged by dialethism and paraconsistent logic spearheaded by the analytical philosopher Graham Priest and others (Priest 1987; 1995; 1998a; 1998b; 2004; 2018; 2022, et al.).

In this paper I wish to focus on the limitation of this dualistic conceptual framework and a certain brand of metaphysical realism. Linguistic mapping of reality as illustrated in the Aristotelian three laws of logic, when taken absolutely as the only norm of truth, is both limiting and human-centric. I argue that such an epistemological stance limits our perspective of the world and reduces the complexity of a thing-event to oversimplicity, the totality of reality to one-sidedness. To elaborate, there are at least three issues of concern in this context, as outlined below.

First, as Shigenori Nagatomo astutely points out in his discussion of the *Diamond Sutra*—a Buddhist text that shares important affinities with Daoist philosophy and is valued by many Daoist practitioners—that in stating categorically that “A is A; therefore, it is not not-A”, Aristotle has cut “A” off from time and context. In this cutting-off, “A” becomes an *a*-temporal and decontextualized object, frozen in time (Nagatomo 2010, 201). “A” stays inertly in an abstract conceptual-linguistic space as an immaterial form. Surely, such an “A”, confined in linguistic-conceptual space, is eternally “A” because it is extracted from time. However, “A” is also “not-A” when we consider time and A’s concrete embodied existence. A flower in full-bloom, for example, is both full of life (A) and withering (not-A) at the same time in the same aspect and in the same part in its in-between-ness as time is passing by. Aristotle’s preference for immaterial form rather than a composite of form and matter as the primary substance illustrates a linguistic-conceptual move, an approach to the essence of beings that misses natural beings’ *suchness* and their existential *situatedness*.³

Secondly, as illustrated earlier, the laws of non-contradiction, excluded middle, and identity are fundamentally dualistic and exclusive. Such an either-or epistemology is ultimately ego- and anthro-po-centric, for it denies inter-being, inter-subjectivity, and the intrinsic relationship between self and other. In substituting the variable “A” with the first-person pronoun “I”, the law of non-contradiction stipulates “I am I; therefore, I am not not-I” where the not-I references

3 It’s worth-noting that Aristotle speaks of temporal composite substance of form and matter as the primary substance in *Categories* 2a11-13. However, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle changes his view and remarks that “[b]y form I mean the essence of each thing and its primary substance” (*Metaphysics* VII, 1032b1 in Aristotle1941a, 792).

“you, he, she, it, and they”. So too, the law of excluded middle declares that either the “I” perspective or the “others” perspective is true but not both. From the “I” perspective, the “others” always stand in opposition to the “I”. However, this insular I-thinking is divisive and fallacious. It neglects the fact that without the world (the “they”, the non-I), there is no I. It forgets that the I-subject is a being-in-the-world, not a being-outside-of-the world.

Thirdly, the dualistic-realist theory of truth coupled with the Aristotelian three laws of logic eliminates the possibility of ineffable truth; it renders the reality of indeterminacy useless. Dialectic paradoxical propositions such as “S is both P and not-P” or “S is neither P nor not-P” are often used to overcome linguistic limitations so as to describe the ineffable, where all existing terms and categories lose their descriptive power. “One chooses dialectic only when one has no other means”, as Nietzsche says (Kaufmann 1968, 467). In focusing merely on what can be parcelled out by categorical terms, the whole is reduced to the clear-cut, the either-or, and one-sidedness. Rigid binary thinking and categorical logic limits our experience of the world.

Keeping these concerns in mind, in what follows I wish to examine some alternative conceptual frameworks by looking at two traditions, Neo-Platonism and Classic Daoism, and briefly discuss their implications. There are three goals in such a comparative analysis: 1) to explore how Hellenistic and Chinese philosophies offer a shared critique of categorical-dualistic thinking from different angles, 2) to investigate how each tradition materializes non-dualism in its own system, and 3) to gather lessons on the self-other relation and environmental practices that emerge from this analysis.⁴

Plotinus: The One, Emanation, and Nature

The One and Emanation

Plotinus’s Neo-Platonic philosophy uniquely blends mysticism with Platoism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism. In terms of its vocabulary and contents, Plotinus’s *Enneads* also shares some interesting parallels with the Daoist classic the *Daodejing*, which will be explored shortly in the section on Daoism. Generally speaking, the most direct entry point to Plotinian mysticism is by means of its descriptions of the One.

4 Both Kwong-loi Shun (2009) and Jana Rošker (2021) have cautioned us not to use Western models as the paradigm to read, interpret, or understand Chinese philosophy. I am mindful of such advice both in this paper and in my other comparative works.

The One is unity-in-itself and the one-and-only origin of all beings. The One (also known as “the First Primal”, the non-being preceding being, duality, and multiplicity) emanates the *Nous* (the Intelligence), i.e., “the Second Primal”, which corresponds to Plato’s Demiurge, Aristotle’s Thought-Thinking-in-Itself, and the world of Being/Forms. The Intelligence (*Nous*) in turn emanates the World-Soul (“the Third Primal”, the aggregate of all souls). Herein, the Three Primal Hypostases (the Divine Triad) constitute the intelligible realm that in turn emanates nature (the physical world), comprised of myriad beings (including humans, animals, plants, etc.) and matter.

Plotinus opts for an emanation account of the One in an attempt to give a less dualistic and more holistic interpretation of the origin of existence and the physical world than what his predecessors Plato and Aristotle had offered. From the non-dual One, everything emanates. As Plotinus writes:

The One is everything and not everything. It is not everything because it is the source of everything. ... The One ... has within it no multiplicity or duality whatsoever ... In order that being be, The One must be not being but being’s begetter. This, then, it may be said, is the primal begetting: perfect – seeking nothing, having nothing, needing nothing – The One “overflows” and its excess begets an other than itself; ... Image of The One, The Intelligence produces as does The One, with—like its prior—a mighty show of strength. This activity is The Soul welling up from Being, The Intelligence ... Contemplating its source it [The Soul] is filled and “goes out” ... and begets its own image: Sense and, the vegetal principle, Nature. (*Enneads* V.2.1 in O’Brien 1964, 106–07)

The One, like the Sun necessarily radiating its rays, emanates the Second Primal (the *Nous*-Intelligence), the Third Primal (the World-Soul), and the post-primal (Nature). The World-Soul is the link between the realm of divinity (the Divine Triad) and the natural world: while the high-phase of the World-Soul contemplates its source (the One and the *Nous*), the lower-phase of the World-Soul generates the entire natural world and gives life and vital powers to living beings in descending order from the higher to the lower: humans, animals, and vegetation (*Enneads* IV.8, V.2). This emanation is an eternal, constant, and impersonal process. Plotinian emanation theory reminds one of chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*, where one reads: “*Dao* produces one. One produces two. Two produces three. Three produces the ten thousand things. (道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。)”—though important differences exist, as will be discussed in the section on Daoism.

Why must the One transcend duality and multiplicity? *Enneads* VI.9.1 argues: “It is by The One that all beings are beings. ..., for what could exist were it not one? Not a one, a thing is not” (O’Brien 1964, 73). The logic is clear if the inquirers would begin with a reflection on the most visible objects to the human eyes—physical entities. In order to be, each physical object must possess some sort of unity that binds its composite parts together, but such unity is a derived unity, a composite unity relying on some external conditions as its cause: it is not unity-in-itself. If unity or oneness were the inherent essence of a physical object, such an object would always be one and always have existed. But such a composite entity once was not; even in its present state of being, it always exhibits the possibility of disintegration into non-being. Thus, no material substance is unity-in-itself, and its unity is derived from another. Moving up on the ontological hierarchy of beings, from bodily to non-bodily beings, neither the immaterial souls or the World-Soul (with its various faculties of desire, perception, reasoning, etc.) nor the *Nous*-Intelligence (the dialectic intuition accompanied by the World of Forms) is unity-in-itself, because they exhibit multiplicity in their state of being. Even “thought-thinking-in-itself” (Aristotle’s unmoved mover), Plotinus argues, is not unity-in-itself because intellection necessarily requires a consciousness that does the reflecting and a consciousness that is being reflected on: thus, Plotinus reasons, “Duality is implied if The Intelligence is both thinker and thought; it is not simple, therefore not The One” (*Enneads* VI.9.2 in *ibid.*, 76). “The One, then, is not The Intelligence but higher” (*Enneads* VI.9.3 in *ibid.*, 77).

Rejecting a naïve endorsement of Aristotelian logic, Plotinus states paradoxically that “being” and “non-being” are both correct predicates of the One. On the one hand, the One is “being” because it is the emanating origin of all existence and the cause of their continued state of being. Without the One, nothing exists. On the other hand, the One is also “non-being” because it is not Being in the traditional Platonic-Aristotelian sense nor is it limited as an individual particular being in the ordinary sense. Rather, the One is Being’s begetter. Thus, “The One is everything and not everything” (*Enneads* V.2.1 in *ibid.*, 106): it is immanently in everything by emanation and yet not confined or equalled by anything.

Ineffableness of the One

Similar to Daoist critique of forms, Plotinus argues that the One is formless. A form in the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, while it actualizes a being, also limits and circumscribes the being that it forms. Form’s specificity and determinateness would undermine the One’s unlimitedness as the origin of

all that exist.⁵ The One is what it is precisely because of its indeterminacy and formlessness. Thus, Plotinus questions the adequateness of applying Aristotelian logic and categories (or any cognitive category) to The One. He writes:

The One is without form, even intelligible form. As The One begets all things, it cannot be any of them—neither thing, nor quality, nor quantity, nor intelligence, nor soul. Not in motion, nor at rest, not in space, nor in time, ... it is the “without-form” preceding form, movement, and rest. (*Enneads* VI.9.3 in O’Brien 1964, 77)

The One is formless. Moreover, because forms as categories and names are the medium of language, the One is nameless. Strictly speaking, any label, even the word “one”, is burdensome. Plotinus cautions that names must be used with extreme care. *Enneads* V.5.6 warns:

It would be better not to use the word “one” at all than use it here in the positive sense, for only confusion would come of that. That word is useful solely in getting the inquiry started aright to the extent that it designates absolute simplicity. But then even this designation must be promptly eliminated, for neither it nor any other designation can be applied to what no sound can convey, what cannot be known on any hearing. (O’Brien 1964, 18)⁶

Transcending all categories, forms, and names (all tools for conceptual knowledge), the One is unknowable. Moreover, because the very nature of conceptual knowledge is necessarily built upon a dualistic cognitive framework between the subject that knows (that which applies the concepts) and the object that is known (that which is being conceptualized), such an epistemological stance already postulates duality, thus severing the knower from the known (*Enneads* VI.9.11). Hence, Plotinus admonishes, “awareness of The One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things”, “but by a presence transcending knowledge. ... Therefore, we must go beyond knowledge and hold to unity. We must renounce knowing and knowable, every object of thought” (*Enneads* VI.9.4 in O’Brien 1964, 78). Only through virtue and dialectic, the purified soul—purged of all traces of the ego-self that fixate on the “I” and duality—by its divine love can experience the final rapture like a lover becoming “oned” with the beloved, the One (*Enneads* I.2, I.3, VI.9.9 and VI.9.11).

5 See, e.g., *Enneads* V.1.7.

6 See also *Enneads* VI.9.5.

The Problem of Matter and Body

As demonstrated above, Plotinian emanation theory advances a less dualistic ontology when compared with Plato's rigid two-world metaphysics and Aristototele's categorical logic. Another philosophical point is worth noting. Plotinus also strongly rejects Gnosticism's teaching that matter and the material world are evil by nature, which is critically important in one's ecological attitude toward nature.

To combat the Gnostic teaching on matter, Plotinus describes matter as that which is "potentially anything" and "everything" though not yet (*Enneads* II.5.1 in Armstrong 1966b, 155; II.5.5 in *ibid.*, 167): it is the "absolutely formless" (*Enneads* I.8.3 in *ibid.*, 285), the "simple" (*Enneads* II.4.8 in *ibid.*, 123), the "indefiniteness" (*Enneads* II.4.11 in *ibid.*, 133, 135; III.4.1, Armstrong, 1967, 143), and the "receptacle" of forms (*Enneads* III.6.13 in *ibid.*, 263–65). Matter in its inchoate state is devoid of all quality and form. But if matter is devoid of all quality and form, Plotinus asks, how can matter be evil? For if "evil" is a quality, formless quality-less matter cannot be evil by having such a quality. Alternatively, perhaps, "it is Evil not in the sense of having Quality but, precisely, in not having it" (*Enneads* I.8.10 in MacKenna 1991, 66). In other words, we call something "evil" not because it has certain inherent quality but because it is not properly formed. If so, then evil is not some sort of substance; rather, evil is the lack of properly constituted form. If this line of logic holds—that evil is understood as "absence" (privation or negation of form) rather than some self-standing quality or substance, then "there will be no self-existent evil" (not even matter). For the reason that absence or negation cannot exist on its own, it can only reside in something that allows negation, just as blindness cannot exist on its own but is the absence of sight in the eye (*Enneads* I.8.11).

Apart from analysing the nature of evil, Plotinus also provides a causal argument in defence of the goodness or at least the neutrality of matter. Since matter emanates from the One, the Good, and the effect must resemble its cause in some degree, Plotinus argues that matter cannot be an evil substance because it shares some characteristics of the One (the Good). Figuratively speaking, matter represents where the dimmest light was present (*Enneads* I.6, V.2; VI.9). While distancing itself from both atomistic materialism and Gnosticism, Plotinus's Neo-Platonic account of matter gave arguably one of the more positive assessment of matter and nature in ancient Hellenistic traditions (Pang-White and White 2001). It has profoundly influenced Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas in later times.

Nonetheless, Plotinus made a fateful turn in his transition from ontology to ethics. Still bound by dualistic thinking, he divides virtues into two categories: the lower and the higher. Lower virtues refer to Aristotelian civic virtues. Civic virtues consider the proper relation between the soul and the body and aim to make a human being a better person by moderating desires and passions and avoiding vices. By contrast, higher virtues refer to the Platonic-Stoic virtues. High virtues consider the soul-in-itself apart from the body. Higher virtues aim to make a person like the divine by completely separating the soul from the body and suppressing all bodily desires, for “the soul is evil to the extent that it is ‘mingled’ with the body, in sympathy with it and judges in accord with it” (*Enneads* I.2.3 in O’Brien 1964, 113). Take the example of temperance, the difference is between “a [lower] temperance that provides bounds only to the desires” and “a [higher] temperance that suppresses them completely”. Hence, for a person who possesses the higher virtue,

[H]e does not limit temperance to the control of pleasure, but, to the extent that it is possible, he is completely isolated from the body. In a word he does not live the life of one who, according to civic virtue, is a good man. He forsakes that life and chooses another in its place, the life of the gods, for his wish is to become like to the gods and not to good men. Likeness to good men is likeness of one image to another image that comes from the same model. But likeness to God is likeness to the model itself. (*Enneads* I.2.7 in O’Brien 1964, 117)

A Plotinian sage is one who takes “the flight of the lone to the Alone”, turning away from the world in a solitary flight marked by “detachment from all things here below, scorn of all earthly pleasures” (*Enneads* VI.9.11 in *ibid.*, 88).

Such an assessment of the physical world, body, and matter reveals Plotinus’ ambivalent attitude toward the natural world. In fact, he noted, “[l]ife here below in the midst of sense objects is for the soul a degradation, an exile, a loss of wings”. The soul falls when it enters human birth, resides in a human body, and “exchanges (as if deceived by the false promises of an adulterous lover) its divine love for the one that is mortal” (VI.9.9 in *ibid.*, 85–86). Although in his ontology of matter Plotinus takes a relatively positive stand toward nature, nonetheless in his virtue ethics the bodily is still regarded as a temptation and a hindrance to enlightenment. Such is the Plotinian contradiction.

Moreover, this paradox continues when we juxtapose the vocabulary used in describing matter and the One in the *Enneads*. We find some interesting parallels, as shown in the following table.

Matter	The One
absolutely formless (<i>Enneads</i> I.8.3)	without-form, formless (<i>Enneads</i> VI.9.3)
non-being (<i>Enneads</i> II.4.11, II.5.5)	non-being (<i>Enneads</i> V.2.1)
unknowable (<i>Enneads</i> I.8.10)	unknowable, ineffable (<i>Enneads</i> V.5.6, VI.9.4, VI.9.11)
simple (<i>Enneads</i> II.4.8)	absolute simplicity, unity-in-itself (<i>Enneads</i> V.2.1, VI.9.2)
indefiniteness (<i>Enneads</i> II.4.10, III.4.1)	undetermined (<i>Enneads</i> VI.9.3)
potentially anything/everything (<i>Enneads</i> II.4.11, II.5.5)	everything and not everything (<i>Enneads</i> V.2.1)

The difference between matter and the One is duly noted. For example, matter is non-being in the sense that it is not yet formed and is posterior to form, whereas the One is non-being in the sense that it precedes/transcends all forms. Nonetheless, if indeterminateness is what distinguishes the One from all other existents and it is by means of indeterminateness that the One is fertile, why could not the indeterminacy of matter be useful in training the mind in preparation for one's ascent to the One? Nothingness/no-thingness or indeterminacy—whether taken physically, as in formless matter, or spiritually, as in the formless One—can be a fruitful link that provides a unified holistic view of the Universe, a world that operates in a circular motion of emanation and return (from the One to nature, and from Nature back to the One). Such a logic of “indeterminacy” or “nothingness/no-thingness” creates a space where possibilities/becomings can take place. However, Plotinus did not take this route. Incapable of fully escaping dualism's grip, Plotinus' stand on non-duality and indeterminacy suffers from inconsistency—it perpetuates an unhealthy condescending attitude towards matter, nature, and the physical world. Could Daoist philosophy, which shares some resemblance with Plotinian emanation, as noted earlier, provide us with some insight on this front?

Daoism: *Dao*, Emanation, and Nature

Dao: Formless and Nameless Origin of all Things

Like the *Enneads*, many scholars have regarded the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, two classic Daoist texts dated back to the fourth to sixth centuries BCE, as classics of mysticism. Similar to the Plotinian One, the ineffable *dao* is at the centre of Daoist philosophy and practice. In chapter 25, one reads:

Something unformed and yet complete,
 Exists before Heaven and Earth.
 Soundless and formless,
 Standing alone and unchanging,
 Pervades all thing without stopping,
 It is like the mother of all under Heaven.
 I don't know its name.

I call it *dao*.

If forced to give it a name, I call it the Great. (My translation)⁷

有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，
 可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

This formless and nameless *dao* is the origin of all existents. Burton Watson notes that in Daoist writings *dao* refers to “a metaphysical first principle that embraces and underlies all being, a vast Oneness that precedes and in some mysterious manner generates the endlessly diverse forms of the world. Ultimately, as the *Tao Te Ching* [*Daodejing*] stresses, tao [*dao*] lies beyond the power of language to describe” (Addiss and Lombardo 1993, xiii).

How does this *dao* generate the myriad things? In terms reminiscent of the Plotinian ontology, the *Daodejing* (= DDJ) speaks of the Daoist emanation process in chapters 1, 40, and 42:

Dao called *dao* is not the constant *dao*.

Names can name no lasting names.

Non-Being [the Nameless] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.

Being [the Named] is the mother of all myriad things.⁸

Hence let there always be non-being so as to observe its subtlety;
 let there always be being so as to see its effect.

The two come from the same source but have different names.

Both are called mysterious.

Mysterious and further mysterious,

the gateway to all subtlety. (DDJ, chapter 1) (my translation)

7 I have benefited from consulting Addiss's and Lombardo's translation (1993) and Chan's translation (1963).

8 Depending on whether the punctuation is placed after the first characters “*wu* 無” and “*you* 有” or after the first two characters “*wu ming* 無名” and “*you ming* 有名”, these two lines of text (無名天地之始，有名萬物之母) may also be translated as “The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth. The Named is the mother of all things.” Here, I adopted the first way of punctuating the text.

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始。有名萬物之母。故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，眾妙之門。

All myriad things under Heaven originate from being.
Being originates from non-being. (*DDJ*, chapter 40) (my translation)
天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

Dao produces one.
One produces two.
Two produces three.
Three produces all myriad things.
All myriad things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*,
Blending their *qi* to achieve harmony.
(*DDJ*, chapter 42) (my translation)
道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

Three observations may be drawn from the above passages:

(a) The Daoist description, “Non-Being [the Nameless] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth. / Being [the Named] is the mother of all things”, resonates with the Plotinian idea that the ineffable ONE (the formless, nameless Non-being) is the origin of Being (*Nous* and forms) and the rest of the world. For both Neo-Platonism and Daoism, the formless and nameless is superior to that which has form and name.

(b) Chapter 42’s descriptors, “one”, “two”, “three”, and “ten thousand things”, suggest a phased emanation process of the world flowing from the first principle, *dao*. It has a *prima facie* similarity to the Plotinian emanation of the One, The *Nous*-Intelligence, the World-Soul, and the Post-Primal Nature.

(c) However, unlike the transcendent Plotinian One, the Daoist “One” in chapter 42 refers to the undifferentiated *qi*, immanent in the world that branches out to *yin* and *yang*, as evidenced by the latter part of the verse. Thus, the Daoist emanation process, with its marked emphasis on immanence, reads more like: “*Dao* produces one (*qi*). One (*qi*) produces two (*yin* and *yang*). Two (*yin* and *yang*) produces three (blending of *yin* and *yang*). Three (blending of *yin* and *yang*) produces all myriad beings. All myriad beings carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, blending their *qi* to achieve harmony.”

Dao and the World

What is *qi*? There are a number of English translations of the term including “material force”, “vital breath”, and “psycho-physical energy”, among others. None of these translations, however, fully capture the complexity of *qi*.⁹ The picto-ideogram of *qi* offers us some clues. *Qi* 氣 consists of two radicals: “气” on the top depicting layers of clouds/mist, “米” at the bottom symbolizing the plants of rice in the field. When the two radicals (气 + 米) are coupled, 氣 conveys the image of dimly visible steam produced from cooking rice and its subtle existential meaning of the energy that sustains life. When used with other adjectives, *qi* denotes multiple interrelated phenomena. For example, *yun qi* 雲氣 means clouds or mist in the sky, *kong qi* 空氣 the air, *tian qi* 天氣 weather, *di qi* 地氣 earth energy, *sheng qi* 生氣 life-energy, *jing qi* 精氣 refined spirit-essence, etc. The multiple uses of the word *qi* in diverse contexts ranging from meteorology to life-energy suggest that *qi* is an important link between *dao* and all beings, both living and non-living.¹⁰

In its unfolding, *qi* further differentiates into *yin qi* 陰氣 and *yang qi* 陽氣. Thus, chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* continues with the following verse: “All myriad things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*. / Blending *qi* to achieve harmony”. All things come into being through the interaction, blending, and harmonization of *qi*. While the *Daodejing* does not provide a further description of *yin* and *yang*, the characteristics of *yin* and *yang* are further elucidated in the *Zhuangzi*.¹¹ In “The Way of Heaven (*Tian Dao* 天道)” chapter, Zhuangzi identifies *yin* with the quiet, soft, and darker energy, and *yang* with the active, strong, and bright force (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 13).¹² One also reads in the “Sir Square Field” (*Tian Zi Fang* 田子方) chapter, “The ultimate *yin* is austere; the ultimate *yang* is dazzling. Austerity comes from Earth and dazzlement issues from Heaven. When these two are in communication, harmony is achieved, and things are born (至陰肅肅，至陽赫赫；肅肅出乎天，赫赫發乎地；兩者交通成和而物生焉)” (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 21; Mair 1994, 202). The

9 As Chung-ying Cheng points out, “all existing translations conceal and obscure the rich experiential structure of meaning in the concept of *ch’i* [qi]” (Cheng 1986, 362).

10 For more, see e.g., Ann A. Pang-White (2009). I have benefited greatly from Chen Guying’s 陳鼓應 (2005) excellent article on Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s contribution to the development of the philosophy of *Dao* and *qi* in Chinese philosophy.

11 The “Ten Commentarial Texts (*Shiyi* 十翼)” of the *Yijing* 易經 (*Classic of Changes*) also discuss the meaning of *yin* and *yang*. However, because the *Yijing* is often regarded as one of the “Five Classics (*Wujing* 五經)” in the Confucian tradition and the complexity of the text is far beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, in order to better focus my discussion in this paper I will bypass the *Yijing* and only use classic Daoist texts.

12 The *Tian Dao* chapter quotes Zhuangzi (aka Chuang Tzu) as saying, “In stillness, he shares the same virtue as *yin*; in movement, he shares the same current as *yang* (靜而與陰同德，動而與陽同波)” (Mair 1994, 121).

“Knowledge Wanders North (*Zhi Bei You* 知北遊)” chapter summarizes the coming together of *yin* and *yang* as the beginning of all existence, including human life, and the relativity of life and death, beauty and ugliness, as the natural rhythm of the world that is respected by the wise:

Human life is the coalescence of vital breath [*qi*]. When it coalesces, there is life; when it dissipates there is death. Since life and death are disciples of each other, how should I be troubled by them? Thus, the myriad things are a unity. What makes the one beautiful is its spirit and wonder; what makes the other loathsome is its stench and putrefaction. But stench and putrefaction evolve into spirit and wonder, and spirit and wonder evolve once again into stench and putrefaction. Therefore, it is said, “A unitary vital breath [*qi*] pervades all under Heaven.” Hence the sage values unity. (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 22; Mair 1994, 212)

人之生，氣之聚也，聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為徒，吾又何患！故萬物一也，是其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐；臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐。故曰：『通天下一氣耳。』聖人故貴一。

To speak of *dao* as a unitary *qi* that “pervades all under heaven” leads us to an important point regarding how the Daoist *dao* differs from the Plotinian One. As *qi*, *dao* is intimately related to nature and the physical world in a deep way. Because *dao* as *qi* “pervades all under Heaven”, there is a mutual resonance between nature, humans, and the spirit world. Nature is not simply a standing reserve, a lifeless being, but a dynamic living source that is coextensive with world and essential to the physical and spiritual health of humanity.¹³ As the last verse of chapter 25 in the *Daodejing* says emphatically:

Humanity models after Earth.

Earth models after Heaven.

Heaven models after *dao*.

And *dao* models after nature/the natural. (My translation)¹⁴

人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

13 A number of scholars have demonstrated how Daoism perceives *Dao* and Nature as a self-generating, immanent, and holistic system of dynamism of things-events, in stark contrast to the West’s mechanical instrumentalist view of the non-human world. See, e.g., Cheng (1986), Callicott and Ames (1989), Callicott (1994), Tucker (1994), Pang-White (2009; 2016), Chai (2016), Schönfeld (2016), Nelson (2021).

14 *Ziran* 自然 may be interpreted in multiple ways: the natural, the self-so, or nature. Here I adopt Wing-Tsit Chan’s translation of *ziran* as “nature”.

Note how a non-hierarchical circular pattern is described here in chapter 25. To further break down the dichotomy of the spiritual versus the mundane, human versus nature, being vs. non-being, usefulness vs. uselessness, the *Daodejing* deploys abundant metaphors, symbols, and similes from the physical world and the ordinary to illustrate paradigmatic Daoist virtues. Vacuity, valley, female, animal, water, ravine, grass, etc.—the elements traditionally viewed by society as the weaker ones in binary oppositional pairs of opposites—are all invested with potent symbolism in the *Daodejing*. One reads:

Is the space between Heaven and Earth not like a bellows (*tuo yue* 橐籥)?
Vacuous yet inexhaustible.

In movement it generates even more. (DDJ, chapter 5, my translation)
天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。

Note how by conventional norm a lowly insignificant bellows is elevated to symbolize the generative force of Heaven and Earth. The usefulness of seemingly useless empty space is repeated in chapter 11:

Clay is moulded to make a utensil.
It is in its emptiness
That it has the use of a utensil. (DDJ, chapter 11, my translation)
埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。

In a similar vein, in chapter 6 the hiddenness of a valley and the female womb (as opposed to the ostentation of a mountain-top or the male phallic organ) is brought to the foreground as metaphors of enigmatic generative force of the universe.

The spirit of the valley (*gu sheng* 谷神) never dies;
It may be called the mysterious female (*xuan pin* 玄牝).
The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth.
Its existence is dimly visible.
Yet its use is never exhausted. (DDJ, chapter 6, my translation)
谷神不死，是謂玄牝。玄牝之門，是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

Note too how the *Daodejing* takes pain in using “*xuan pin* 玄牝” here (*pin* 牝 = a female ox) to represent the all-encompassing female generative power (again in chapters 55 and 61), rather than using the word “*mu* 母” (a vocabulary often used in human context) from chapters 1, 20, 25, 52, and 59, in order to break down the

hierarchical “human vs. animal” dichotomy. Another noted female symbol is “*ci* 雌” (a female bird), appearing in chapters 10 and 28.

In addition to being like the female, the *Daodejing* also makes use of water, another important symbol from nature, to advise how humans can come close to the *dao* by humbling themselves:

Best to be like water (*shui* 水).

Water benefits all things but does not compete.

It dwells in [lowly] places that all people despise.

That is why it is so close to *dao*. (DDJ, chapter 8, my translation)

上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處衆人之所惡，故幾於道。

Colourless, tasteless, inconspicuous, and ordinary, water does not compete with other liquids for the spotlight, and yet it is essential to sustain life. Like the *dao*, water naturally flows downward, taking a humble place. It sustains and nurtures all beings non-discriminatorily, staying in the background without boasting its merits. And yet, this is exactly where its greatness lies.¹⁵

Utilizing the symbol of grass (*cao* 草), another humble and often overlooked element from nature, to highlight the Daoist lesson of the reversal of opposites and the strength and use of weakness (e.g., chapter 40), the *Daodejing* reminds us that:

All things, grass as well as trees, are soft and tender when alive;

They are withered and dry when dead.

Therefore, the hard and the strong are the companion of death;

The soft and the weak are the companion of life.

The army that is strong will not win.

The trees that are sturdy will be cut down.

The strong and the big are inferior.

The soft and the weak are superior. (DDJ, chapter 76, my translation).

萬物草木之生也柔脆，其死也枯槁。故堅強者死之徒，柔弱生之徒。是以兵強則不勝，木強則共[兵]。強大處下，柔弱處上。

Only when one resonates with nature’s subtle lesson of flexibility and gentleness and let go of the habitual domination of the world will one enjoy a long life and is in accord with the *dao*. In the same vein, we read in the “Heaven and Earth (*Tiandi* 天地)” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

15 According to the Chu bamboo-slip text “The Great One Births Water” (*Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水), *dao* (the Great One) hides (thus reveals) itself in water. (Nelson 2021, 7)

Being one with the beginning, one becomes vacuous (*hsü*, receptive to all), and being vacuous, one becomes great. One will then be united with *the sound and breath of things* (*he hui ming* 合喙鳴). When one is united with the sound and breath of things, one is then united with the universe. The unity is intimate and seems to be stupid and foolish. This is called profound and secret virtue; this is complete harmony. (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 12; Chan 1963, 202, emphasis added).

同乃虛，虛乃大。合喙鳴，喙鳴合，與天地為合。其合緼緼，若愚若昏，是謂玄德，同乎大順。

Zhuangzi often personifies natural elements (e.g., Kun fish, Peng bird, Shadow Jing, Uncle River, the Spirit of the North Sea Ruo, the Wind) as important conversation partners in his parables, many times as unexpected teachers of *dao*. Similarly, here Zhuangzi purposely uses “*hui ming* 喙鳴”—“*hui* 喙” literally means “the beak of a bird or the snout of an animal” and “*ming* 鳴” the sound of birds—to convey the sound and breath of *all* beings (not just humans), in an attempt to knock down our habitual human-centric way of thinking.¹⁶

Observations and Preliminary Conclusion

As demonstrated above, both Daoist and Plotinian philosophies value the nameless. Both effectively problematize a certain realist theory of language and concomitant linguistic mapping of reality that together narrow our perspective of the world. Yet, at the same time, we find that Daoism is more consistent than the Plotinian theory in its rejection of the polar opposition of the spiritual vs. the physical. After all, if emanation entails that the cause is immanent in its effects, then even the least effect of the One, e.g., matter and the physical world (however remotely it is from its source), ought to be considered as manifestations of the One, endowed with positive functions, not just something recalcitrant—an evil best to be avoided or grudgingly tolerated if unavoidable.

The consistency of the Daoist ontology and ethics may be attributed in part to its thoroughgoing rejection of the either-or dualism. Daoism’s trademark philosophy of “mutual production of opposites” is expressed in several places in the Daoist classic *Daodejing*. One reads, for example, “being and non-being generate one another (有無相生 *youwu xiangsheng*)” (DDJ, chapter 2) and “reversal is the movement of *dao* (反者道之動 *fanzhe daozhidong*)” (DDJ, chapter 40, my

16 See <https://www.zdic.net/hant/%E5%96%99> and <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/zh?searchu=%E5%96%99>. Accessed September 8, 2022.

translation), to cite just two examples. It is not simply that non-being produces being, or being produces non-being, unidirectionally. Rather, it is that being and non-being (like *yin* and *yang*) mutually generate each other in a non-hierarchical bi-directional cyclic process of change. Since every and each thing-event is situated in this all-encompassing cyclical network of change that affects all, a being is never a static thing that has actualized itself once for all. Rather, every being is an event that always exists in a state of both A and not-A, in a process of becoming. Such becoming is not merely diachronically in a linear sense of coming-into-being and going-out-of-existence, but also synchronically in its totality of being-in-relations, intrinsically tied to all other beings and conditions. The non-I is in the I and the I is in the non-I. From a multi-perspectival (non-ego-centric) view, there is neither a permanent self nor a permanent other. We are both the self and the other (A and \sim A) simultaneously. There is *not one* permanent centre but many centres in this great net of beings. As paradoxical as it may seem, Zhuangzi elucidates:

There is nothing that is not the “that” and there is nothing that is not the “this”. Things do not know that they are the “that” of other things; they only know what they themselves know. Therefore, I say that the “that” is produced by the “this” and the “this” is also caused by the “that”. This is the theory of mutual production. ... Because of the right, there is the wrong, and because of the wrong, there is the right. Therefore, the sage does not proceed along these lines.... The “this” is also the “that”. The “that” is also the “this”. ... When “this” and “that” have no opposites, there is the very axis of Tao [*dao*]. Only when the axis occupies the centre of a circle can things in their infinite complexities be responded to. The right is an infinity. The wrong is also an infinity. Therefore I say that there is nothing better than to use the light (of nature). (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 2; Chan, 1963, 182–83)

物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自知則知之。故曰：彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是方生之說也。... 因是因非，因非因是。是以聖人不由... 是亦彼也，彼亦是也。... 彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。樞始得其環中，以應無窮。是亦一無窮，非亦一無窮也。故曰「莫若以明」。

In this non-dualistic logic (“this” = “that”, $A = \sim A$, self = others), when coupled with the ontology of *qi*, neither *dao* nor humanity can regard itself as being-outside-of-nature (the centre lies beyond and outside of the net of beings) because nature (the physical world, the other) is an intrinsic part of the self in the totality

of relations.¹⁷ In contrast, the Plotinian problem stems from construing the One (as well as the other Primal Hypostases) as being-outside-of-nature rather than being-in-nature. Dualistic logic is at bottom exclusive and oppositional. The Plotinian problem of matter and nature remains irreconcilable in an emanation theory that is mired in dualism.

Therefore, although both Plotinian and Daoist philosophies are successful in showing the problem of categorical logic and naming, an intellectual critique is itself insufficient in reverencing a thing-event as a thing-event in its totality, in its concrete “suchness”. What is also needed is an attitudinal change that views a thing-event not simply as an abstract extracted entity frozen in time, but as a phenomenon-in-the-making, constantly transformed by time, nature, and matrices of meanings of multiple worlds. In materializing such a de-centred non-dualist multi-universe stance in its respective ontology and ethics, the Daoist philosophy fares better than the Plotinian philosophy and has much to offer us in contemporary ecological considerations.

The eco-feminist Karen Warren, in her “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections”, argues forcefully that hierarchical dualism produces “a logic of domination” that oppresses both the non-human natural world and women. She writes,

Eco-feminists take as their central project the unpacking of the connections between the twin oppressions of women and nature. Central to this project is a critique of the sort of thinking which sanctions that oppression.... A patriarchal conceptual framework is characterized by value-hierarchical thinking.... Such patriarchal value-hierarchical thinking gives rise to *a logic of domination*, ... Eco-feminists assume that patriarchal value-hierarchical thinking supports the sort of “either-or” thinking which generates normative dualisms, i.e., thinking in which the disjunctive terms (or sides of the dualism) are seen as exclusive (rather than inclusive) and oppositional (rather than complementary), and where higher value or superiority is attributed to one disjunct (or, side of the dualism) than the other. It, thereby, conceptually separates as opposites aspects of reality that in fact are inseparable or complementary; e.g., it opposes human to nonhuman, mind to body, self to other, reason to emotion. (Warren 1987, 6–7)

To redeem the Earth and women, “Eco-feminism, therefore, encourages us to think ourselves out of ‘patriarchal conceptual traps,’ by reconceptualizing ourselves and our relation to the nonhuman natural world in nonpatriarchal ways” (ibid., 7).

17 The terminology of “being-in-nature” vs. “being-outside-of-nature” are borrowed from Nagatomo (2010, 206–07).

Moreover, to correct the modern West's technological domination and instrumental conception of nature that have hastened climate change and triggered worsening environmental crises, the deep ecologist Arne Naess credits Daoism along with other religions for their insights and advocates an "Ecosophy" with eight principles that would require a total overhaul of an anthropocentric thinking paradigm in favour of a bio-centric consciousness that would embrace the intrinsic values of nonhuman life and the ecosphere (Naess 1986). In line with Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions address the importance of this philosophical and attitudinal change in the following terms:

In keeping with the spiritual traditions of many of the world's religions, the deep ecology norm of Self-Realization goes beyond the modern Western self which is defined as an isolate ego ... This socially programmed sense of the narrow self or social self dislocates us ... Spiritual growth ... begins when we cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans ... But the deep ecology sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world. (Devall and Sessions 1985, 66–67)

Eric Nelson, in his recent book, *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*, traces the notion of the good and argues that Daoist philosophy, in contrast with Hellenistic philosophy, gives rise to an anti-moralist and nature-centred view of the good. Such a perspective of the good is a fruitful ground for developing a new, non-coercive Daoist-inspired therapeutic restorative ecology that connects cosmological, bio-spiritual, and bio-political considerations, a new ecology that is able to address the devastating contemporary environmental crises that arise from the problematic "Anthropocene". As he observes:

A preliminary indication is found in the *Daodejing*, chapter eight, where the highest good is not described as a form or an idea: it is like water (*shangshan ruo shui* 上善若水) in that it benefits (nourishes) the myriad things without contention (*shui shanli wanwu er buzheng* 水善利萬物而不爭). ... In this vision of the good attributed to Laozi, one works with the myriad things and turns none away ..., and, without needing to do so or coercing them, supports the functioning of their own nature or that which is as it is ... As is evident in this preliminary sketch of the nature-oriented and anti-moralistic language of the good in the *Daodejing*, the attempt to answer the Socratic question by turning to Daoist

sources ... could potentially, ... , (1) lead to an alternative understanding of the natural world and practice than the ones articulated in dominant Western philosophical discourses and (2) indicate exemplars and models that could address problems arising from our precarious ecological situation and the intensifying contemporary environmental crisis-tendencies – generated by human social-economic activities – of catastrophic climate-chaos, the relentless overuse and destruction of entire habitats and species, and the detrimental effects of massive quantities and deadlier forms of pollution. (Nelson 2021, 7)

The Anthropocene is an ecological and existential dead end. Environmental abuse and destruction, like any other form of oppression, has its root in the dualistic either-or top-down “logic of domination”. Let us think: why are we unable to slow down the massive environmental deterioration that is still ongoing despite more than 100 years of conservation efforts since the late 19th century? It is evident that we must change our conceptual framework. Instead of perpetuating the either-or (dualistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal) logic of exclusion as an unquestionable truth, let us replace it with an inclusive, non-binary, non-oppositional logic of “both-and”. To put a stop to the rapidly worsening ecological conditions and their devastating impacts on all forms of life, it is time to engage in *deep* reflection and questioning, and Daoist philosophy provides us with a good alternative model for moving forward in this context.

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Presentation of “Living Being” in Early Indian Buddhism and Its Ethical Implications

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Abstract

This article focuses on the presentation of the notion of “living being” and its link to ethics in the Pāli Buddhist canon and its commentaries. This objective is achieved by examining the key Pāli terms that refer to “living being” (i.e., *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*) in different contexts with the aim of identifying their semantic ranges. The article then discusses how the notion of “living being” in the Pāli sources can be situated within the main doctrinal models developed in early Buddhism such as the six sense bases (*āyatana*), dependent origination (*patīccasamuppāda*), and the Abhidhammic presentation of cognition, which are linked to a larger ethical framework that axiomatically repudiates the existence of a human “self” as the centre of all analysis. Instead, complex systems that link all living beings serve as the foundation for Buddhist praxis, and lead to a new understanding of the lived experience, which is founded on an ethics of behaviour, centred around non-violence or the non-harming of all beings. The article concludes by exploring the important contribution of Buddhist ethics to the current environmental challenges by underscoring the essential role played by the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) as the very source and foundation of an ethical stance from which ethical actions can proceed.

Keywords: “living being” in ancient India, Theravāda Buddhism, Pāli terms *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*, plants in Theravāda Buddhism, early Buddhist ethics

Pojmovanje “živega bitja” v zgodnjem budizmu in etične implikacije

Izvleček

Prispevek raziskuje pojem “živega bitja” (i. e. *satta*, *pāṇa*, in *bhūta*) in njegovo umestitev v etične okvire staroindijskega diskurza v theravādskem budističnem kanonu. Najprej preučuje osnovne pālijske termine za pojem “živega bitja” v različnih kontekstih s ciljem, da bi določil njihova specifična semantična polja. Nato razpravlja, kako lahko pojem “živega bitja” predstavimo v okviru glavnih modelov zgodnje budistične doktrine, kot so model šestih čutov (*āyatana*), soodvisnega nastajanja (*patīccasamuppāda*) in predstavitve kognicije v *Abhidhammi*. Vsi ti modeli, ki so osnovani in globoko vpeti v budistični etični okvir, ne postavljajo človeka v središče, temveč ga predstavljajo kot del

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kompleksnih struktur in procesov, ki povezujejo vsa živa bitja. Iz takšnih izhodišč izhaja tudi budistična praksa, ki je osnovana na razvoju moralno-etičnih vrtilin, kot so prijeteljstvo, sočutje in predvsem nenasilje do vseh živih bitij. Na koncu prispevek raziskuje, kako lahko budistična etika doprinese k sodobnim izzivom, kot so okoljstvena kriza, in pri tem razmišlja s stališča osnovne budistične postavke o nesebstvu (*anattā*), ki predstavlja izvor, osnovo in nujen pogoj za etično držo, le-ta pa se odraža v etičnem delovanju, ki izključuje kakršnokoli obliko nasilja nad živimi bitji.

Ključne besede: pojem "živega bitja" v stari Indiji, theravādski budizem, pālijski termini *satta*, *pāṇa* in *bhūta*, rastline v theravādskem budizmu, zgodnja budistična etika

Abbreviations¹

A	<i>Aṅguttaranikāya</i>
As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
DP	<i>A Dictionary of Pāli</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇi</i>
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
Pp	<i>Puggalapaññatti</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i> , <i>Majjhimanikāyāṭṭhakathā</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
PED	<i>Pāli-English Dictionary</i>
S	<i>Saṃyuttanikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i> , <i>Dīghanikāyāṭṭhakathā</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vibh-a	<i>Sammohavinodanī</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

1 The abbreviations of Pāli sources and the quotation system follow the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* (Epilegomena to vol. 1, 1948 5*–36*, and vol. 3, 1992, II–VI). The numbers used for the quotations of Pāli sources refer to the volume and page of the PTS edition (e.g., M I 21 refers to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, vol 1, 21).

Introduction

The inspiration for this paper came from reflections about the current situation in the world. One of the greatest challenges presently faced by humanity is the severe degradation and destruction of the natural environment and the resultant climate change, which will, in the long (or even short) term, imperil the very existence of humans along with numerous ecosystems. Different approaches to the current environmental problems, which are inextricably linked to ethical issues, have been investigated, mainly using standard tools of analysis and problem solving. In trying to explore new paradigms and perspectives, this paper investigates how the early Buddhist concept of “living being” and its links to ethics are presented in the ancient Indian discourse, with a particular focus on the Theravāda² Buddhist sources.

All major ancient Indian religions and philosophies investigated and theorized the meaning of consciousness, sentience, and the precise nature of living beings.³ In response to these issues, Indian systems of thought developed a number of theoretical models as well as a range of contemplative practices. When referring to sentience or living beings, several terms were used in the ancient classical language of scholarship (Sanskrit), each depending on the specific context and religious movements of the time. Overall, like many traditional cultures, ancient Indian religions more or less reflected widespread beliefs in an animated and sacred natural environment, inhabited by myriads of living beings, including animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and various invisible realms where non-material beings also abided. For example, the earliest textual records, the Vedas,⁴ attest to the veneration of the natural environment, with the Vedic pantheon abounded in deities related to nature and natural phenomena such as the goddess of Earth (*Ṛṥhivī*), the god of Fire (*Agni*), the god of Wind (*Vāyu*), the River goddess (*Sarasvatī*), and many more.⁵ In the Vedic tradition,

- 2 In this paper, I use the term Theravāda Buddhism in reference to the Buddhist tradition based on the Pāli canon, its commentaries, and related literature. The term Theravāda has been widely used for designating the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, and thus sometimes it is also called Southern Buddhism.
- 3 Among the many sources which elaborate on this issue, see also numerous papers that have been previously published about the topic in this journal, such as, for instance, Dessein (2016), Zalta (2016), Markič and Kordeš (2016), Hashi (2015), etc.
- 4 The earliest Vedic text, the *R̥gveda*, probably dates from the middle of the second millennium BCE, although the dating of early Indian textual history is very uncertain.
- 5 As the Vedic tradition has received considerable scholarly attention, there have been many studies of the Vedic pantheon, with the earliest comprehensive surveys by Macdonell ([1897] 1971), Bloomfield ([1908] 1969), Oldenberg (1923), and Gonda (1975), followed by many treatises on specific deities (e.g., the study on Agni by Jurewicz (2010)) or other features of the tradition.

many animals were revered as sacred, especially the horse, bull, cow, goat, snake, cow, tortoise, and birds, each with links to particular deities. For example, the god Agni was associated with both the goat and the horse, while Vedic goddesses were linked to the life-giving cow. Plants were also venerated,⁶ particularly trees that were regarded sacred and frequently addressed as deities, while occasionally an entire forest would be invoked as the goddess Aranyāni.⁷ Likewise, in later and post-Vedic periods, trees were considered to be living beings with their own sentience (*jīva*),⁸ and they were commonly revered as the abode of numerous deities and other living beings.

In the context in which early Indian Buddhism arose and developed, the issue of sentience was explored by all major traditions of ancient India, but was particularly comprehensively addressed in Jainism, an important ascetic tradition that was founded in northern India in the same general period as Buddhism (around the mid- to late first millennium BCE) and has continuously existed in India up until the present day. A brief review of Jain teachings may be helpful here as a way to understand early Buddhist approaches to the notion of a living being, since the non-harming of living beings is perhaps the most prominent Jain teaching from the earliest days. Jainism propounds that a sentient principle (*jīva*) exists not only in humans and animals, but also in plants, sub-microorganisms (*nigoda*), and natural elements such as air, water, earth, and fire.⁹ The Jain typology of sentient beings is based on the number of senses possessed by a living being. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, one of the earliest and most important texts of Jainism, composed between the second and fifth century CE, classifies sentient beings as follows: at the lowest level are beings with only one sense (i.e., touch), which include sub-microorganisms (*nigodha*), the smallest units of matter known as the earth bodies, water bodies, fire bodies, and air bodies, and significantly, plants. Animals have between two and five senses: for example, worms have two senses (i.e., touch and taste); termites and fleas have three (i.e., touch, taste, and smell); winged insects four (i.e., touch, taste, smell, and sight); and deities, humans, hell beings, and larger animals (e.g., fish, birds, quadrupeds) have five (i.e., touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing). Some beings with five senses (i.e., humans, animals born from the womb, deities, and hell beings) also possess the sixth sense of

6 For example, an entire hymn in the *Rgveda* (10.97) is devoted to plants (*oṣadhi*), addressing them as goddesses with healing powers.

7 For example, *Rgveda* 10.146.

8 For example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VI.11.2) states that trees are alive, being permeated by the sentient principle (*jīva*), and, as explained in the commentary by Śaṅkarācārya, they are non-moving beings that possess consciousness (*cetanāvantaḥ sthāvarā*) (*Īśādidāśopaniṣadaḥ* 531).

9 See Jaini (1979, 109–110); Dundas (2002, 95).

the mind (*manas*) that facilitates thinking (Umāsvāti 2011, 45–46). According to Jainism, the surrounding world is thus to a large extent alive. Humans, in particular, have the ability to cultivate ethical behaviour toward all other sentient beings. Jainism closely interrelates cosmology, the natural world, and ethics; like many other Indian traditions, it teaches that the sentient principal (*jīva*) moves from one life to another according to the law of *karma*, with rebirth taking place in four realms or destinies (*gati*), i.e., as deities (*deva*), humans (*manuṣya*), hell beings (*nāraki*), or animals and plants (*tiryāṇca*).¹⁰ The goal of Jain practices is the ultimate freedom from all *karma*, which is achieved through various ascetic practices. The pivotal practice is non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), that is, avoiding any harm to living beings, which is the very foundation of Jain ethics. For Jains, non-violence should be practiced not only toward humans but also toward animals, plants, and elemental bodies as much as possible. The non-anthropocentric ethics of Jainism was embraced, to varying extents, by other Indian traditions of the time, including Buddhism, although their definitions of a living being varied.

Terms for “Living Being” in the Pāli Canon and Its Commentaries

Judging from the textual evidence, early Buddhism had many common features with Jainism: both traditions emerged in the same period (i.e., in the mid- to late first millennium BCE) and shared a number of fundamental premises and articulations common to the ascetic (*śramaṇa*) movements of India at the time. Early Buddhist representations of sentience are likewise grounded in the ethics of non-violence, though to a lesser degree than in Jainism. In each tradition, the key terms referring to the notion of “living being” are often similar with parallel usages, although they also crystallize the doctrinal differences between the two traditions. In the Pāli canon and its commentaries, several terms are used to refer to life and living beings, mainly *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*,¹¹ which have overlapping English renderings, with all three being commonly translated as “life, living being, or sentient being”.¹² Semantic distinctions can be identified by examining their usage in the canonical and post-canonical textual sources, which will be treated in detail below in attempt to pinpoint their semantic ranges.

10 *Sarvārthasiddhi* §265, quoted in Jaini (1979, 108 (fn. 30)).

11 I mainly draw from the Theravāda Buddhist sources in this paper, and thus the key terms are given in parentheses in Pāli.

12 For example, *satta* is usually translated as “living being, creature, sentient being”, *pāṇa* as “living being, life, creature”, *jīva* as “life, soul”, and *bhūta*, which has a broader semantic spectrum, as “being, creature, living being” (DP, PED, s.v.).

Satta

One of the most common and broadly used terms for “living being” is *satta*, which has numerous attestations in the Pāli canonical and post-canonical texts in varied contexts. The word is usually (and unexceptionally) translated as “being, living being, living creature” (PED, *s.v.*). It appears in many instances in the Pāli canon (*Tipiṭaka*) and its commentaries in reference to living beings in the most general way, designating all beings that abide in any of the Buddhist realms.¹³ For example, in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D I 82), the word *satta* encompasses all beings subject to *kamma*, both human and non-human, both material and non-material, and living in all worlds. Likewise, in the *Mahānidānasutta* (D II 69), the different kinds of beings that reside in the various realms and have different types of bodies and perceptions are all designated as *satta*.¹⁴ Sometimes *satta* designates beings from a specific realm: for example, in the *Brahmajālasutta* (D I 17) it refers to beings from the realm of radiant deities (*ābhassara*), or in the *Sammohavinodanī* (Vibh-a 144) it denotes beings in the limitless realm (*aparimāṇā sattā*). In the Abhidhammic texts, when various material and mental states and processes are discussed, the word *satta* designates living beings in the most general sense (e.g., Dhs 144, 154, 212; Vibh 339–342).¹⁵ It is similarly employed in post-canonical texts. For example, in the *Visuddhimagga*, *satta* mainly refers to any living being, particularly in the context of expounding the notion of non-self as, for example, in the passage on mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*), which states that apart from material and mental phenomena, there is no “being” (*satta*).¹⁶

In some instances, the meaning of the term *satta* is explained. For example, in the *Rādhasamyutta*, it is said that a being (*satta*) is one who is “attached (*satto*)”¹⁷ to and stuck in desire, greed, delight, and craving for materiality, ... feeling, ... perception, ... mental factors, ... and consciousness ...”¹⁸ (S III.190).¹⁹ The *sutta*

13 For example, according to one of the best-known models of Buddhist cosmology, there are five realms in which living beings can be reborn according to their *kamma*: the worlds of the gods, humans, animals, ghosts, and hell.

14 *Satta* is attested in this sense in many other instances: e.g., D III 263; Paṭi I 121; Vism 205, 457, 552.

15 See also As 42, 68, 191, 406; Vibh-a 94, 176, 458, 467.

16 Vism 593: *na satto, na puggalo atthi*. It is similarly used in Vism 238, 627.

17 The Pāli term *satta* can also mean “attached”; in this case, it is a past participle from the verb *saj-* “to cling to, to be attached” (PED, *s.v.*).

18 All translations from Pāli into English in this paper are my own.

19 S III.190: *Rūpe kho Rādha yo chando yo rāgo yā nandi yā taṇhā tatra satto tatra visatto tasmā satto ti vuccati. Vedanāya ... Saññāya ... Saṅkhāresu ... Viññāṇe yo chando yo rāgo yā nandi yā taṇhā tatra satto tatra visatto tasmā satto ti vuccati.*

thus links the notion of *satta* with craving for and clinging to the five aggregates (*khandha*), i.e., the five components that constitute a living being.²⁰ The passage then concludes with the statement that “the destruction of craving is *nibbāna*”,²¹ thus broadly relating the term *satta* to beings who are subject to craving (*taṇhā*) and the consequent bondage of *saṃsāra*. The *Visuddhimagga* further comments on this passage, saying that “in ordinary speech this term [*satta*] of common usage is also applied to those who are without craving”, thus taking *satta* as a general designation for all living beings, those with craving and those without, just like “in customary language the term ‘palm fan’ (*tālavanta*) refers to all kinds of fans, even those made of split bamboo” (*Vism* 310).²²

To recapitulate, the notion of *satta* seems to predominantly refer to living beings in the broadest and most generic sense. In this article, I thus propose a working translation of *satta* as “being”. This is also indicated in many other Theravāda texts. For example, in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the passage describing the practice of loving kindness (*mettā*) begins with wishing well to all beings (*satta*) before listing specific groups of beings encompassed by the term, including deities, human beings, men, women, as well as beings referred to by the terms *pāṇa* and *bhūta* (*Paṭis* II 131), implying that the latter two are subcategories of *satta*. Although the three terms are usually rendered into English as “living being”, viewing them as mere equivalences or synonyms does not seem to be warranted.

Bhūta

The term *bhūta*, which also signifies living being, has a wide semantic range and is rendered into English as “produced, become, being, living being, nature, world, truth, correct, ghost” (*DP*, *PEDF*, s.v.). In the *Papañcasūdanī* commentary, *bhūta* is explained to include “the five aggregates, ghosts, elements, those existing, those who are free from taints, all beings, plants, and so on”.²³ The fact that the word is a past participle from the root *bhū-* “to become, to be” is reflected in the explanation of *bhūta* in the *Visuddhimagga*: “Beings (*bhūta*) are so called because they are fully become (*sambhūtattā*), because of their being produced

20 Among the many ways of understanding what a “being” is in Buddhism, the analytical model of the five aggregates (*khandha*) proposes that the illusionary “person” is comprised of the following five groups: materiality (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental factors (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). On the five aggregates, see the *Khandhavagga*, S III.

21 S III.190: *Taṇhakkhayo hi Rādha nibbānan ti.*

22 *Vism* 310: *Rūhīsaddena pana vītārāgesu pi ayaṃ vohāro vattati yeva, vilīvamaye pi vijānivese tālavaṇṭavohāro vīya.*

23 Ps I 31: *pañcakkhandhāmanussa-dhātu-vijjamāna-khīṇāsava-satta-rukkhādīsū dissati.*

(*abhinibbattattā*)”.²⁴ It often occurs in reference to beings in a general sense; for example, in the *Ratanasutta*, benevolent wishes are addressed to all beings (*bhūtā*) (Sn 39), or in the *Kukkuravattikasutta* (M I 390), the term is used to explain the rebirth of all beings, saying that “the reappearance of a being (*bhūta*) is due to a being; what actions one does, due to that one reappears”.²⁵ Likewise, it is said in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II 157) that “all beings (*bhūtā*) in the world, all bodies must break up”.²⁶ Similar to *satta*, *bhūta* can thus generally refer to beings that inhabit any of the realms, although *bhūta* is very rarely attested in this general sense in comparison to the frequent occurrences of *satta*.²⁷

Bhūta sometimes refers to the beings of a particular realm such as the world of humans and lower deities (e.g., M I 2, 328). Along with the adjective *mahat*, it is occasionally used to designate those who have attained any of the four stages of awakening and are known as “great beings”, as in the *Uposathasutta* (A IV 207).²⁸ More rarely, the term can also signify “truth, being true” (e.g., Pp 50, Vism 204). *Bhūta* is also attested in the sense of “has come to be”, as in the expression describing present and future beings as “those who have already come to be (*bhūta*) and those who are about to become” (*sambhavesī*).²⁹ In this sense, there are also a few attestations of *bhūtā* in the *Abhidhamma*, mainly in reference to something that “has become, come to be”.³⁰ In addition, in the Pāli commentaries, the term signifies “element” when materiality is discussed.³¹ *Bhūta* is also a component of the compound *bhūtagāma*, which denotes “plants, trees, vegetation”. This latter term always occurs in an ethical context, most commonly in the *Vinayaṭṭhaka* (Vin IV 34),³² when the offence of destroying plants, viewed as living beings, is discussed. In the *Suttapiṭaka*, *bhūtagāma* appears as a component of a larger compound *bījagāma* “seeds and plants”, once again in the specific context of showing non-violence toward them. For example, in the *Brahmajālasutta*, it is said that “the ascetic Gotama refrains from injuring seeds and

24 Vism 310: *Bhūtattā bhūtā; sambhūtattā abhinibbattattā ti attho*.

25 M I 390: *bhūtā bhūtassa upapatti hoti, yaṃ karoti tena upapajjati*. Similarly in M I 390, A V 290.

26 D II 157: *sabbeva nikkhipissantī bhūtā loke samussayaṃ*. Similarly D II 163, M I 36.

27 The term *satta* is attested about ten times more frequently than *bhūta*. The number of occurrences of the terms discussed in this article are broad estimates based on the numbers generated by searches using the Digital Pali Reader.

28 A IV 207: *mahataṃ bhūtānaṃ āvāso*.

29 E.g., S II 11: *bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭhītiyā sambhavesīnaṃ vā*.

30 E.g., Dhs 187; As 172, 227; Vibh 2, Vibh-a 305.

31 E.g., As 300, Vibh-a 7, 137, 173, 265, Vism 367, 444.

32 Vin IV 34: *bhūtagāmapātabyatāya pācittiyaṃ ti*.

plants” (D I 5).³³ Another compound with *bhūta* referring to all living beings is *pāṇabhūta*, which is again mostly attested in relation to the non-violence shown toward all living beings; it usually appears in the phrase *sabbapāṇabhūtahitānukampī*, “compassionate for the welfare of all living beings”.³⁴

Pāṇa

The word *pāṇa*, which is (once again) usually rendered into English as “living being, living creature” (DP, PED, *s.v.*), has a great number of attestations in the *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries. The term also has other meanings, such as “breath, life” (DP, PED, *s.v.*), thus reflecting the noun’s derivation from the verb “to breath” (*pa-an-*). Consequently, *pāṇa* is sometimes translated as “breathing, animate being”. This link is also articulated in the explanation of term *pāṇa* in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 310): “Beings are called *pāṇa* because of their state of breathing (*pāṇanatā*); this is because their existence depends on in-breaths and out-breaths.”³⁵

The numerous occurrences of *pāṇa* in the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentarial literature predominantly appear in an ethical context when the harming or non-harming of living beings are discussed.³⁶ For example, in the *Udumbarikasīhanādasutta* (D III 48), it is said that “an ascetic does not harm a living being (*pāṇa*), does not cause a living being (*pāṇa*) to be harmed, does not approve of harming a living being (*pāṇa*)”.³⁷ Or in the *Pāsādikasutta* (D III 133), an *arahat* is described as one who “cannot intentionally take the life of a living being (*pāṇa*)”,³⁸ and the *Jīvakaṣutta* (M I 371) uses *pāṇa* in relation to “killing a living being (*pāṇa*)”.³⁹ The predominant use of the term *pāṇa* in the context of the (non)-killing of living beings is also reflected in compounds formed with this word such as *pāṇaghātī* “one who kills a living being”, *pāṇakoṭi* “the end of one’s life”, *pāṇahara* “taking away life”, and *pāṇada* “one who rescues, gives life” (DP, *s.v.*). By far, the most frequently attested compound formed with *pāṇa* is *pāṇātipāta*, “killing living

33 D I 5: *bhijagāmbhūtagāmasamārambhā samārabbhā paṭivirato samaṇo gotamo*. Similarly in D I 6, 64; M I 180; M II 226; M III 34; S V 470; A II 209; A V 205.

34 E.g., D I 173; M III 46; S IV 314, A II 208, Vibh 244.

35 Vism 310: *Pāṇanatāya pāṇā; assāsapassāsāyattavuttitāyā ti attho*.

36 To distinguish *pāṇa* from *satta* (“being”), a working translation of *pāṇa* as “living being” is used.

37 D III 48: *tapassī na pāṇam atipāpeti, na pāṇam atipātayati, na pāṇam atipātayato samanūñño hoti*.

38 D III 133: *sañceicca pāṇaṃ jīvītā voropetuṃ*. See also A II 176; M I 39, 371, Dhṃ 270, etc.

39 M I 371: ... *pāṇaṃ ārabhati*.

being, destruction of life, taking life”, and the word’s derivations *pāṇātipāti* and *pāṇātipātika*, “one who kills”.⁴⁰ The compound *pāṇātipāta* occurs in the very first of the five Buddhist moral precepts (*pañcasīlāni*),⁴¹ which represent the basic code of ethics for lay people, while it is also one of the leading precepts in other sets of moral guidelines for the laity and those living a monastic life. The first rule of moral training (*sikkhāpada*) is abstaining (*veramaṇī*) from killing living beings (*pāṇātipāta*), which reflects the pivotal role played by non-violence in Buddhist ethics. Apart from referring to human beings, the word *pāṇa* often occurs in relation to animals. The phrase *tiracchānagatā pāṇā* is frequently employed to designate animals in general.⁴² For example, in the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta* (M III 167–170) *pāṇa* refers to different kinds of animals that are classified according to what they eat, or in the *Appamādasutta* (A V 21) the phrase *jaṅgalānaṃ pāṇānaṃ* designates animals in the wilderness. The derivative *pāṇaka* also frequently designates animals in general (e.g., S IV 198) or specifically insects (As 279) and worms (Vism 259).

The word *pāṇa* also appears in an ethical context in the *Abhidhamma*, again most frequently in the compound *pāṇātipāta* when the killing of living beings is discussed. The later commentaries, such as the *Atthāsalinī* commentary (As 97), further elaborate what is meant by taking life:

Taking life (*pāṇātipāto*) means destroying a living being (*pāṇa*), killing or slaughtering. “Life” signifies in common use a being (*satta*); in its ultimate sense (*paramatthata*), it means life faculty (*jīvitindriya*).⁴³

The notion of “living being” (*pāṇa*) is thus explained as (and equated with) “life faculty” or “vital principle” (*jīvitindriya*), which is one of the twenty-two faculties (*indriya*), i.e., important aspects or qualities expounded in Buddhist teachings.⁴⁴

40 The compound *pāṇātipāta* and its derivations account for more than half of all attestations of the word *pāṇa* in the *Tipiṭaka*.

41 The five precepts (*pañcasīla*) involve abstaining from killing sentient beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming alcohol and similar substances (Harvey 2013, 264–278).

42 See also M III 25; S III 85, 152; S V 228; A II 33; As 66.

43 As 97: *Tattha pāṇassa atipāto pāṇātipāto nāma; pāṇavadho, pāṇaghātoto vuttaṃ hoti. Pāṇoti cettha vohārato satto, paramatthato jīvitindriyaṃ*. See also Sp II 439, Sv I 69, Ps I 199.

44 The faculties are listed and discussed in several Pāli texts (e.g., S V 203–207), and especially in the *Abhidhamma*. In the *Vibhaṅga*, the twenty-two faculties include the six sense faculties (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), life faculty, male and female faculties, five feeling faculties (pleasure, pain, mental ease, mental displeasure, neutrality), five spiritual faculties (trust, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom), and three faculties of realization (coming to know the unknown, knowing, having known) (Vibh 122: *Bāvisatindriyāni: cakkhundriyaṃ sotindriyaṃ ghānindriyaṃ jivhindriyaṃ kāyindriyaṃ manindriyaṃ itthindriyaṃ purisindriyaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*

The term *jīvitindriya* is mainly attested in the commentarial texts, most frequently in the *Abhidhamma* corpus. In the Abhidhammic analysis of cognition, *jīvitindriya* is one of the mental concomitants (*cetasika*) that always arises along with other concomitants at every moment of cognition (*citta*) throughout one's life. What we call a "living being" is presented in the *Abhidhamma* as a complex web of ever-changing processes involving numerous components that keep arising under various causes and conditions. One of the mental concomitants (*cetasika*) that occurs along with each moment of cognition (*citta*) is the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), which oversees, sustains, and vitalizes the mental states that arise with it. In other words, it is a faculty that facilitates the continuity of mental processes. The *Atthasālinī* commentary (As 123) explains that the role of the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*) is to govern, vitalize, and sustain the associated and co-nascent phenomena (*dhamma*), its characteristic is a ceaseless watching over the phenomena that arise with it in cognitive processes, and its function is the continuity of the mental process (*pavattanarasa*).⁴⁵ According to the *Vibhaṅga* (Vibh 123), the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*) is twofold: the material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) and the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*).⁴⁶ The former (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) is described as follows:

The material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) is that, which in these material phenomena (*dhamma*) is life, persistence, going on, sustaining, moving on, continuing, guarding, vital principle.⁴⁷

The non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) is then explained with the same definition but only referring to non-material phenomena (*dhamma*).⁴⁸ *Jīvitindriya* thus stabilizes and sustains both non-material phenomena (*dhamma*) in its role as one of the universal, ever-present mental concomitants (*cetasika*) of cognition (*citta*), and material phenomena, which are regarded as *kamma*-originated materiality. Taking life thus means destroying the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*).

sukhindriyaṃ dukkhindriyaṃ somanassindriyaṃ domanassindriyaṃ upekkhindriyaṃ saddhindriyaṃ viriyindriyaṃ satindriyaṃ samādhindriyaṃ paññindriyaṃ anaññātāññassāmīndriyaṃ aññindriyaṃ aññātāvindriyaṃ.)

45 As 123: *Anupālanalakkaṇe indaṭṭhaṃ kāretūti indriyaṃ. Jīvitameva indriyaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ. Taṃ pavattasantatādhipateyyaṃ hoti. Lakkhaṇādīhi pana attanā avinibhuttānaṃ dhammānaṃ anupālanalakkaṇaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ, tesam pavattanarasaṃ.*

46 Vibh 123: *Tattha katamaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ? Duvidhena jīvitindriyaṃ: atthi rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ, atthi arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.*

47 Vibh 123: *Yo tesam rūpīnaṃ dhammānaṃ āyu ṭhiti yapanā yāpanā iriyanā vattanā pālanā jīvitam jīvitindriyaṃ: idaṃ vuccati rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.* See also Dhs 11–12.

48 Vibh 123: *Yo tesam arūpīnaṃ dhammānaṃ āyu ṭhiti yapanā yāpanā iriyanā vattanā pālanā jīvitam jīvitindriyaṃ: idaṃ vuccati arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.*

In the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, the term *jīvita* is mostly attested in the compound *jīvitindriya*, whereas in the *Suttapiṭaka* and *Vinayapiṭaka*, *jīvita* appears on its own, predominantly in reference to human life in general,⁴⁹ human life span⁵⁰ or in the context of destroying life.⁵¹ *Jīvita* can also signify livelihood in phrases such as *jīvitam kappenti* “they make their living”.⁵² Another term related to *jīvita* is *jīva*, which also signifies life. It is most frequently translated into English as “soul” (e.g., Jaini 1979) and sometimes (more fittingly) as “sentient principle” (Soni 2020). In contrast to Jainism where it is a foundational concept, *jīva* only seldom occurs in the Pāli textual sources, prevalently in *suttas* where the Buddha speaks with Jain and other ascetics and brahmins, discussing their views on the existence of the permanent sentient principle (*jīva*) and its relation to the body.⁵³

To recapitulate, the words *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*, which are commonly translated into English as “living being”, have different, though to some extent overlapping semantic spectra. The most frequently attested term *satta*, rendered in this article as “being”, has the broadest signification, designating all beings that abide in any of the Buddhist realms, and is largely attested in this sense in all three collections (“baskets”) of texts known as the *Tipiṭaka* as well as its commentaries. Another term that can signify beings in a general sense is *bhūta*, although it is attested much less frequently than *satta*. *Bhūta* appears in the compound *bhūtagāma*, which specifically signifies plants and is always used in the context of showing non-violence toward them. Another term with many occurrences is *pāṇa*. In distinction to *satta*, it is rendered here as “living being”. It mostly signifies the creatures living on the earth (e.g., S I 37: *pāṇā pathaviṃ sitā*) and appears in Pāli textual sources predominantly in reference to the non-killing of humans, animals, and occasionally plants. In the commentarial literature, the term “living being” (*pāṇa*) is, in terms of Abhidhammic analysis, linked to the notion of “life faculty” or “vital principle” (*jīvitindriya*). The term *jīva*, which is the central notion of the sentient principle or being in Jainism, is very seldom attested in the Theravāda canon, appearing mainly in the *suttas* where the Buddha engages in philosophical arguments with Jain and other ascetics.

Identifying these semantic differences can provide us with a more precise understanding of how the notion of a living being was conceptualized in the Pāli canon and its commentaries, and how it was incorporated into the ethical framework

49 E.g., S I 121; S II 283; S V 384; A III 54, 433; A IV 48.

50 E.g., Vin III 260; D II 233; S I 55, A IV 137.

51 E.g., D I 56, 85–86; D III 73, 235; M I 517; M III 64–65; S III 113; S IV 329; A I 27; A III 211.

52 E.g., Vin III 74; Vin IV 239; D I 9–12, 67; M I 62; S I 92; S V 9; A I 225.

53 E.g., D I 189; D II 333; M I 157, 484; S II 61; S III 258; A II 41; A V 197; Dhs 159.

of non-violence in early Buddhism. When investigating sentience and ethics, two Buddhist approaches to understanding reality must be considered: the conventional (*sammuti*) one that is described using ordinary expressions (*voḥāra*) and concepts (*paññatti*) and includes entities such as living beings, and the perspective of ultimate reality (*paramattha*), which analyses reality as consisting of *dhammas*, the ultimate units of existence.

Different Perspectives on the Notion of “Living Being” in the Theravāda Textual Sources and Their Ethical Implications

Conventional Perspective (sammuti)

From the conventional or everyday perspective, a countless number of entities or living beings (*satta*) inhabit the different Buddhist worlds. Buddhist cosmology uses several models to present the different realms. One way of describing existence is through the model of the three realms: 1) the realm of sense desire (*kāmmadhātu*), 2) the realm of material form (*rūpadhātu*), and 3) the formless and immaterial realm (*ārūpadhātu*), with each realm also referring to different levels of meditation and kinds of rebirth. Another well-known representation is the model of the five realms (*gati*) in which living beings can be reborn, depending on their *kamma*, namely, in the worlds of the gods, humans, animals, ghosts, or hell beings.⁵⁴ From the Buddhist perspective, all these worlds are impermanent (*anicca*), and all beings abiding therein are subject to non-satisfactoriness and suffering (*dukkha*). As such, the main concern of Buddhist teaching is the problem of suffering and liberation from suffering, as the Buddha says in the *Alagaddūpamasutta* (M I 140): “What I teach is [about] suffering and the cessation of suffering.”⁵⁵ Buddhism postulates that liberation from suffering can be attained through the eightfold path involving the development of virtue, meditation, and wisdom. The very foundation of the eightfold path is training in virtue, comprising the cultivation of appropriate speech (*sammā vācā*), action (*sammā kammanta*), and livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), which essentially means not harming other beings and thus reducing their suffering. Moral rules are also articulated in the five precepts (*pañcasīla*) for lay people, prescribing that one should abstain from 1) killing living beings, 2) stealing, 3) engaging in sexual misconduct, 4) lying, and 5) consuming alcohol and similar substances (Harvey 2013, 268–78). Monastics are guided by a more extensive set of guidelines, which are assembled

54 E.g., S III 234., M I 73.

55 M I 140: *dukkhañ-c’eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*.

in one collection (“basket”) of the Pāli canon known as the *Vinayapiṭaka*, where a great number of rules for monks—and even a greater number for nuns—are expounded and discussed in detail.

The first precept, which is considered the most essential, relates to abstaining from killing living beings (*pāṇātipātā*),⁵⁶ thus positioning non-violence as the most crucial primary virtue and the very foundation for developing wholesome and ethical mental states, which are the pivotal condition allowing for wisdom (*paññā*) to emerge and leading to liberation from suffering.⁵⁷ In this context, it is important to understand what the notion of a living being refers to. As mentioned earlier, the term predominantly used for living beings within the ethical framework is *pāṇa*. Some scholars suggest that *pāṇa* signifies those who breathe (e.g., Harvey 2013, 271), obviously connecting the term with the verb “to breathe” (*pa-an-*), although it is uncertain which beings were considered to breathe in early Buddhism.⁵⁸ Notwithstanding the status of plants, and as ample textual evidence demonstrates, it is indisputable that in early Buddhism animals were, along with humans, regarded as living beings (*pāṇa*). It was commonly believed that animals can be reborn, in line with their *kamma*, as humans and *vice versa*, although an animal rebirth is generally regarded as unhappy, since they are usually subject to a great amount of suffering. Animals, generally designated in Pāli sources by the term *pāṇā*, or more specifically by *tiracchānagatā pāṇā*, include a wide range of species. They are presented in different ways; for example, in the *Bālapaṇḍita-sutta* (M III 167–170), they are grouped as those who feed on grass (e.g., elephants, horses) or on dung (e.g., dogs, jackals), those who live in darkness (e.g., moths, earthworms), in water (e.g., fish, crocodiles), and in dirt (i.e., organisms that eat dead bodies). While the animal kingdom is undoubtedly inhabited by living or sentient beings—a common belief shared by all major Buddhist schools—the question as to whether plants should also be regarded as living beings is not straightforward.

As mentioned above, in the Pāli canon plants are usually referred to by *bhūta*, and more specifically *bhūtagāma*. The term *bhūtagāma* appears most frequently in terms of injuring or destroying plants, especially in the collection of monastic rules in the *Vinayapiṭaka*, where damaging vegetation, particularly trees, is seen as an offence for monks and nuns (e.g., Vin IV 34, Vin V 15, Vin V 37–38).

56 In the Theravāda tradition, this precept is formulated as: “I undertake the training-precept to abstain from killing living beings” (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*).

57 From the Abhidhammic standpoint, killing is always rooted in hate and delusion (As 102: *Mūlato ti pāṇātipātā dosamohavasena dvimūlako hoti*), which obstruct ethical states.

58 We should beware of using contemporary understandings of breath, and indeed physiology, when evaluating teachings from the past.

These rules point to a belief in plants as living beings, and also reflect the religious milieu of the time in which it was considered objectionable for ascetics and renunciates of any religious tradition to destroy plants. As mentioned earlier, the abstaining from harming plants often includes seeds, typically in the phrase *bījagāmahūtagāmasamārambha* “refraining from injuring seeds and plants”, which appears in *suttas* describing the virtues of monastics or the Buddha (e.g., M II 226, A V 205). The term *bhūtagāma* is explained in the Vinaya (Vin IV 34–35) to include five groups of plants according to their type of propagation, i.e., those arising from roots or bulbs (*mūlabīja*) (e.g., ginger, turmeric), trunks or stems (*khandhabīja*) (e.g., fig tree, banyan tree), joints (*phaḷubīja*) (e.g., sugar cane, bamboo), cuttings (*aggabīja*) (e.g., basil, swamp mallow), and seeds (*bījabīja*) (e.g., grains, pulses).⁵⁹ Indeed, all these types of plants (*bhūtagāma*) may have been considered to be living beings given that it was an offence to destroy them. In addition, plants were believed to be the abode for a myriad of living beings, from animals to deities, spirits, and other creatures. Apart from the common belief that living beings resided in trees, other plants such as medicinal herbs and grasses were also considered to be inhabited by deities and other creatures (e.g., M I 308). There are some indications, especially in the *Vinayapīṭaka*, that earth, water, and fire may have been regarded as living beings as in Jainism. For example, the monastic rules forbade digging the earth (Vin IV 32–33), splashing water (Vin IV 112), or kindling fire (Vin IV 115). However, the elements could have merely been viewed as the abodes of living beings that should not be harmed, or perhaps the Buddhists simply tried to follow the moral code expected of ascetics at the time.⁶⁰

Unlike Jainism, in which animals and plants are categorized as a single group of sentient beings (*jīva*) (alongside other groups such as deities, humans, and hell beings), in Theravāda Buddhism animals and plants are discussed in different contexts and designated by different Pāli terms, namely *pāṇa* and *bhūtagāma*, respectively. However, the term *pāṇa* was also occasionally used in reference to plants. For example, in the *Vāseṭṭhasutta*, the Buddha explains the generic

59 Vin IV 34–35: *bhūtagāmo nāma, pañca bījajātāni, mūlabījaṃ khandhabījaṃ phaḷubījaṃ aggabījaṃ bījabījaṃ c’ eva pañcamāṃ. mūlabījaṃ nāma haliddi siṅgiveraṃ vacaṃ vacatthaṃ ativisaṃ kaṭukaroḥiṇī usīraṃ bhaddamuttakaṃ yāni vā pan’ aññāni pi atthi mūle jāyanti mūle sañjāyanti, etaṃ mūlabījaṃ nāma. khandhabījaṃ nāma assattho nigrodho pilakkho udumbaro kacchako kapīthano yāni vā pana aññāni pi atthi khandhe jāyanti khandhe sañjāyanti, etaṃ khandhabījaṃ nāma. phaḷubījaṃ nāma ucchu veḷu naḷo yānivā pan’ aññāni pi atthi pabbe jāyanti pabbe sañjāyanti, etaṃ phaḷubījaṃ nāma. aggabījaṃ nāma ajjukāṃ phaṇijjakaṃ hiriveraṃ yāni vā pan’ aññāni pi atthi agge jāyanti agge sañjāyanti, etaṃ aggabījaṃ nāma. bījabījaṃ nāma pubbaṇṇaṃ aparāṇṇaṃ. yāni vā pan’ aññāni pi atthi bīje jāyanti bīje sañjāyanti, etaṃ bījabījaṃ nāma. It should be noted that the Jains have a similar (but more complex) taxonomy.*

60 For discussion on the sentience of the elements, see Schmithausen (1991, 46–57).

division of living beings (*pāṇa*) that includes plants, i.e., trees and grasses (*tiṇarukkha*) (Sn 117),⁶¹ or in some instances, living beings (*pāṇa*) are divided into mobile (*tasa*) and stationary (*thāvara*) beings, most likely referring to animals and plants, respectively.⁶²

Another term for plants, which is largely used in Jainism, is *ekindriya jīva*, meaning “living being with one sense faculty”. There are only a few references to beings with one sense (*ekindriya*) in the Pāli canon, mainly occurring in the *Vinayapiṭaka* in relation to the prohibition of cutting trees. For example, in the story about a monk Channa who cut a tree, the Buddha explains that those who cut a tree “are depriving a one-faculty being of life” (Vin III 156; *ekindriyaṃ ... jīvaṃ viheṭhenti*). The commentary on this passage specifies that this faculty is the sense of touch (Sp III 575: *ekindriyanti kāyindriyaṃ*). Since early Buddhism presents plants as beings with one sense (i.e., touch), this implies, if viewed within the Buddhist doctrinal framework, that they could (though not necessarily) have consciousness arising when the sense of touch is in contact with a tactile object; in this case, they could be considered, like in Jainism, as beings that only consume the results of *kamma* at the lower levels of life. As mentioned earlier, plants are also occasionally denoted by the term *pāṇa*, which is, from the ultimate standpoint (*paramattha*), equated with the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*) (As 97) that is one of the essential mental concomitants (*cetasika*) arising with every moment of consciousness. As explained in the *Abhidhamma* texts, *jīvitindriya* governs, vitalizes, and sustains the associated and co-nascent phenomena (*dhamma*) (As 123) and is twofold, involving the material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*) and the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*). From the Abhidhammic standpoint, plants as one-sense (*ekindriya*) living beings could be viewed as having the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*), very likely the material one (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*), which sustains the plant’s *kamma*-originated materiality (*kammasamuṭṭhānarūpa*), whereas it is uncertain whether they would also possess the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*). If plants were considered to only consume past *kamma* and not accumulate any new *kamma*, then according to Findly (2002, 259–62) this could indicate that they would eventually end up in a new and better rebirth, or conversely, that they could be positioned at the very end of the cycle of rebirths.⁶³

61 Sn 117: *jātivibhaṅgaṃ pāṇānaṃ, aññamaññā ti jātiyo. Tiṇarukkhe pi jānātha, na cāpi paṭijānare, liṅgaṃ jātīmayaṃ tesaṃ, aññamaññā hi jātiyo.*

62 An overview of the different interpretations of mobile and stationary beings is given in Schmithausen (1991, 59–64).

63 Findly (2002, 261) mentions some East Asian Buddhists such as Chan-jan and Dōgen who positioned plants “as beings who have already reached enlightenment”. However, there is no evidence for such an interpretation in early Buddhism.

In summary, the textual evidence indicates that the early Buddhists may have considered plants to be living beings, or at the very least, they proclaimed their respect for plants in conformity with other religious traditions of the time. This view is also shared by Schmithausen (1991) in his comprehensive study on the sentience of plants in Buddhism, mainly based on material from the *Vinayapiṭaka* and *Suttapiṭaka*. He cautiously suggests that in early Buddhism, plants may have been a kind of “borderline” case, since the texts are not sufficiently explicit in theoretically determining their status (1991, 69). As outlined by Schmithausen (1991, 83–104), in later Buddhism, from the mid-first millennium CE onwards, many texts such as the *Yogācārabhūmi*, *Tarkajvālā*, and Dharmakīrti’s *Nyāya-bindu* claim that plants are not living beings. Arguing against their sentience, the texts maintain that plants lack consciousness, do not produce *kamma*, and are thus without desire or aversion. However, as mentioned by Schmithausen (1991, 102), this view may also stem from a very pragmatic reason: if plants were regarded as living beings, then harvesting and eating them would amount to massive slaughter with the consequent accumulation of bad *kamma*.

From the conventional point of view, it was important for Buddhists to understand what was meant by the notion of living being (*satta*, *pāṇa*, *bhūta*), since Buddhist ethics is largely about cultivating wholesome mental states, which condition subsequent wholesome verbal and physical actions. At least in the Theravāda textual tradition, there is no justification for any form of violence, but instead showing kindness and compassion to all living beings (*satta*) is strongly emphasized. The moral guidelines on how to relate to other beings, which mostly refer to beings understood by the term *pāṇa* and include humans and animals (and to some extent, plants and other beings such as deities), were, as discussed earlier, quintessential. Abiding by the moral precepts was considered to reduce the suffering of living beings (*pāṇa*), and principally to create a solid foundation for progress on the Buddhist path to final liberation from suffering. Here the question may be raised as to how moral cultivation was viewed from the ultimate perspective, grounded in the notion of non-self (*anattā*).

Ultimate Perspective (*paramattha*)

As mentioned earlier, reality is presented in Buddhist teachings from two perspectives, namely, the conventional (*sammuti*) and the ultimate (*paramattha*). The *Suttapiṭaka* discusses the doctrine from one or the other perspective or sometimes combines both, whereas the *Abhidhamma* is largely concerned with the presentation of ultimate (*paramattha*) reality. Already in the earliest layers of the Buddhist tradition, the teachings were expressed using several models such as the model of the five aggregates

(*khandha*), six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and the Abhidhammic *dhamma* theory. These different modes of analysis are inter-linked and interrelated, each representing the world of experience in its totality but emphasizing different aspects or perspectives. They are all grounded in and permeated by the central notion of all Buddhist teachings, notably non-self (*anattā*). From the ultimate perspective, the notion of a living being as an entity is considered to be an illusion. For example, the *Visuddhimagga*, in the passage on re-becoming (*bhāva*) in dependent origination, states that ultimately there is no “living being (*satta*)” and no “sentient principle (*jīvo*).”⁶⁴ It is clinging to and erroneously identifying with any phenomena (material or non-material) experienced that gives rise to the idea of self or an “I”, which is regarded as the very root of ethical problems and suffering (*dukkha*). The so-called “being” or “person” is comprised of complex processes involving multiple components and is presented in Buddhism in several ways.

One such presentation is the analytical model of the five aggregates (*khandha*), according to which clinging to the aggregates (*upādānakkhandha*) constructs an illusionary “person” or “self”, which is actually a dynamic and complex structure comprised of the following five (impersonal) groups:

- (1) Materiality (*rūpa*): materiality of the body and “external” material world.⁶⁵
- (2) Feeling (*vedanā*): it arises at every moment of cognition and may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.
- (3) Perception (*saññā*): it recognizes, conceptualizes, and labels an experience.
- (4) Mental factors (*saṅkhāra*): they determine how an object is cognized and responded to, e.g., with desire, fear, compassion, equanimity, etc.⁶⁶
- (5) Consciousness (*viññāṇa*): it arises at any of the six sense-doors and knows or cognizes the object of experience.⁶⁷

64 Vism 553–554: *na satta, na jīvo*. It is also similarly used in Vism 238, 593, 627.

65 The term *rūpa* can refer to any kind of materiality (e.g., S II 252, IV 382), including the physical body. It is thus defined in the *Visuddhimagga*: “materiality comprises the four great elements and the materiality derived from clinging to the four great elements” (Vism 558: *Rūpan ti cattāri mahābhūtāni catunnaṃ ca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ*). The materiality aggregate (*rūpak-khandha*) consists of twenty-seven material categories or phenomena (*rūpadhamma*), which include the four great elements (*mahādhātu*) and twenty-three secondary or derived material categories (*upādāyarūpa*); for a comprehensive study of the Theravāda analysis of materiality, see Karunadasa (1967).

66 Feeling (*vedanā*) and perception (*saññā*) arise along with every moment of cognition and trigger mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) that are related to *kamma* (S III 87).

67 For discourses on the five aggregates, see the *Khandhavagga* S III.

Identifying with any of the five groups means that one considers the body and material objects, feelings, perceptions, memories, and so on as “mine” or “I”. This constructed “self” gives rise to craving so that pleasant experiences may endure, and unpleasant ones may cease. Buddhism regards the identification with the aggregates, which is based on ignorance, as the very foundation of unethical responses—mental, verbal, or physical—and the consequent suffering. The textual sources reiterate that the nature of the five aggregates is impermanent (*anicca*), non-satisfactory (*dukkha*), and without an intrinsic self or identity (*anattā*). This understanding or insight is called wisdom (*paññā*), which is the foundation for the path to liberation (*nibbāna*).⁶⁸

In the Buddhist analysis of cognition, every moment of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the result of multiple causes and conditions, and in turn, it further conditions the arising of other phenomena. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not stable or lasting, it cannot be located, and it does not belong to the object that it cognizes. As soon as it arises, it ceases; therefore, there is no person or “I” that remains throughout one’s life. Buddhist texts speak of six types of consciousness that correspond to the six senses through which humans (and other beings such as deities or large animals) perceive, feel, and cognize experiences. Apart from the five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body), they also include the mind (*mano*), regarded as the sixth sense through which mental objects (*dhamma*) are cognized. The totality of experiences is therefore presented by this model of the six senses and their objects, which is also called six sense bases (*āyatana*).⁶⁹ The Buddha thus says in the *Sabbasutta* (S IV.15):

And what, monks, is the all? The eye and visual forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena. This, monks, is called the all.⁷⁰

In other words, all that exists is the sensorium, and experiences take place at the six sense bases (*āyatana*), where the sense organ, the sense object, and the corresponding consciousness come together (Table 1).

68 Impermanence (*anicca*) is listed in many *suttas* as the first of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) of the five aggregates (*khandha*); for example, in the *Aniccavagga* of the *Khandhasaṃyutta* (S III 21–25), it is said that understanding the impermanence (*anicca*) of the five aggregates leads to weariness and dispassion toward them and (consequently) to liberation. The *sutta* then continues with the same presentation for suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). See also S III 94; S III 104.

69 The six sense bases are discussed in the collection of *suttas* in the *Salāyatanaṣaṃyutta* (S IV 1–261).

70 S IV.15 *Kiñca bhikkhave sabbaṃ? Cakkhuṃ ceva rūpā ca. Sotañca saddā ca. Ghāṇaṇca gandhā. Jivhā rasā ca. Kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca. Mano ca dhammā ca. Idam vuccati bhikkhave sabbaṃ.*

Table 1: Six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*)

Internal sense bases (<i>ajjhattikāni āyatanāni</i>)	External sense bases (<i>bāhirāni āyatanāni</i>)	Corresponding consciousnesses (<i>viññāṇa</i>)
eye (<i>cakkhu</i>)	visible form (<i>rūpa</i>)	eye-consciousness (<i>cakkhuvīññāṇa</i>)
ear (<i>sota</i>)	sound (<i>saddā</i>)	ear-consciousness (<i>sotaviññāṇa</i>)
nose (<i>ghāṇa</i>)	smell (<i>gandhā</i>)	nose-consciousness (<i>ghānaviññāṇa</i>)
tongue (<i>jivhā</i>)	taste (<i>rasā</i>)	tongue-consciousness (<i>jivhāviññāṇa</i>)
body (<i>kāya</i>)	tangible object (<i>phoṭṭhabba</i>)	body-consciousness (<i>kāyaviññāṇa</i>)
mind (<i>mano</i>)	mental phenomena (<i>dhamma</i>)	mind-consciousness (<i>manoviññāṇa</i>)

Consciousness, which arises when a sense comes into contact with its corresponding object, can be erroneously interpreted by the mind through the construction of a subject, an “I”, or a living being who is experiencing it. However, from the ultimate perspective, the cognitive processes, which are dependent on the senses, are empty of any self, as stated in the *Suññasutta* of *Saḷāyatanaśamyutta* (S IV 54): “The world is empty because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self.”⁷¹ The *sutta* then continues that each of the six senses, their objects, and the corresponding consciousness are empty of self.⁷²

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which depends on the senses and their corresponding objects, is an important link in the dynamic model of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which outlines the causal conditions and the interdependence of phenomena by means of the twelve links in the following way (SN II 1–133; D II 55–71):

- (1) ignorance (*avijjā*) (2) mental factors (*saṅkhārā*) (3) consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (4) mind and body (*nāmarūpa*) (5) senses (*saḷāyatana*) (6) contact (*phassa*) (7) feeling (*vedanā*) (8) craving (*taṇhā*) (9) clinging (*upādāna*) (10) becoming (*bhava*) (11) birth (*jāti*) (12) aging and death (*jarāmaraṇa*).⁷³

71 S IV 54: *Yasmā ca kho Ānanda suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā suñño loko ti vuccati.attena vā attaniyena vā.*

72 S IV 54: *Cakkhuṃ kho Ānanda suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā. Rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā. Cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā. Cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā. ...*

73 SN II 2: *Katamo ca bhikkhave paṭiccasamuppādo? Avijjāpaccayā bhikkhave saṅkhārā, saṅkhārāpaccayā viññānaṃ, viññāṇāpaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpāpaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ,*

When consciousness (3) arises along with the contact (6) with an object, which takes place through one of the senses (5) within the mind-body (4), a feeling (7) automatically arises. If this contact, along with the associated feeling, generates a desire (8) to retain the pleasant feeling or to eliminate the unpleasant one due to past ignorance (1) and latent tendencies from the past (2), which are not observed and understood (to be impermanent and empty), this gives rise to clinging (9) to the object and the continuation of habitual states (10), involving the arising (11) and passing away (12) of the same responses, which are erroneously viewed as the self or person. As such, further ignorance (1) and habitual tendencies (2) are generated, perpetuating the entanglement in *saṃsāra* and the construction of a self or person based on ignorance, craving, and clinging, which have, inevitably, harmful ethical consequences.⁷⁴

It is through consciousness (*viññāṇa*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and perception (*saññā*) that thoughts (*vitakka*) arise, and mental proliferation (*papañca*) ensues, creating the erroneous idea of an “I” and from this the past, present, and future are constructed. This is described in the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta*, beginning with the example of the eye sense base:

Eye-consciousness arises dependent on the eye and visible form. The meeting of the three is contact, and contact conditions feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates. With what one mentally proliferates as the source, through that a person is assailed by perceptions and notions in relation to past, future, and present visible forms that are cognized though the eye. (M I 111–112)⁷⁵

From the Buddhist perspective, a “self” means clinging to the chosen objects of craving—from material objects to ideas and views—which perpetuates the illusion about the existence of a substantial entity or an “I” with the consequent creation of the “other”. This (very significantly) prompts an unethical stance, and any ensuing actions result in unnecessary suffering. Buddhist practice, which includes

saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇha paccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātippaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ [soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā sambhavanti].

74 The brief explanation of dependent origination in this paragraph is summarized from Ditrich (2016, 22–23).

75 M I 111–112: *Cakkhuñc’āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tattonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhuviññēyyesu rūpesu.*

moral training and meditation, is essentially training in how to relate to the sense objects without craving (*taṇhā*), which means not identifying with or considering the sense base (*āyatana*) and experiences arising there, as “mine” (*mama*), “I am” (*aham asmi*), or “myself” (*me attā*).⁷⁶

The three interrelated models of Buddhist teachings (i.e., five aggregates, six sense bases, and dependent origination) are all intrinsically grounded on the notion of non-self (*anattā*) and already recorded in the earliest layers of the Buddhist tradition. The two ways of approaching reality (i.e., conventional and ultimate perspectives) are expounded in the teachings presented in the *Suttapiṭaka*, which includes, along with numerous narratives and images, passages in which the doctrinal concepts and terms are systematically expounded in a highly technical manner as, for example, in the *Saṅgītisutta* (D III 212-271). The method of technical explanation had become well established by the time of the *Abhidhamma* corpus, i.e., the collection of seven works in Pāli⁷⁷ belonging to the Theravāda Buddhist canon and usually dated to the third century BCE, although its foundations may stem from the early beginnings of Buddhism. The *Abhidhamma* systematizes the core components of Buddhist doctrine and articulates them in a very precise technical language by describing and analysing all the components involved in the lived experience, their interrelations, causes, and conditions. The whole Abhidhammic theory of reality is grounded in the theory of *dhammas* which are presented as the basic components of the entire phenomenal existence.

Dhammas are regarded as the components of the rapid flow of momentary mental and physical phenomena, which are interdependent, ever-changing, and without self or individuality. Lived experience is described at the fundamental level (*paramattha*) as an interaction between numerous interdependent *dhammas*, which are classified into four categories: 1) cognition (*citta*), 2) mental concomitants (*cetasika*), 3) materiality (*rūpa*), and 4) *nibbāna* (Bodhi 1993, 25). The first three categories are considered impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without intrinsic substance or self,⁷⁸ while *nibbāna* is the unconditioned state

76 As explained in the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, view(s) (*diṭṭhi*), craving (*taṇhā*), and conceit (*māna*) are linked to the three aspects of creating the self: “I am” (*aham asmi*) is associated with views (*diṭṭhi*), “mine” (*mama*) with craving (*taṇhā*), and “myself” (*me attā*) with conceit (*māna*) (Spk II 215: *ahaṅkāramamaṅkāramānānusayāti ahaṅkāradīṭṭhi ca mamaṅkārataṇhā ca mānānusayā ca*).

77 The works are the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*, *Puggalapaññatti*, *Kathāvatthu*, *Yamaka*, and *Paṭṭhāna* (As 21–23).

78 It is said that all phenomena (*dhamma*) are regarded to have no essence or living being (*nissattaniṭṭhā*) (As 38–39); the word *nissatta* means “unsubstantial, lacking an essence”, while *niṭṭhā* signifies “without sentient principle” (see DP; PED, s.v.).

that is empty, beyond time, change, and any afflictions. The notion of non-self is completely integrated into the Abhidhammic analysis of reality and intrinsically linked to Buddhist ethics.⁷⁹

Buddhist Ethics and the Natural Environment

Ethics is deeply embedded in various presentations of Buddhist teachings but especially in the *dhmma* model expounded in the *Abhidhamma*, which is underpinned by the principle of *kusala*, usually translated as “good, wholesome, skillful” (PED, s.v.), and mostly used in reference to ethical mental states. The cultivation of moral virtues (*sīla*) is regarded as the foundation for the development of ethical mental states, which in turn are a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of wisdom (*paññā*), a pivotal mental factor (*cetasika*) on the way to liberation. Wisdom (*paññā*) is described as a direct insight into the impermanence (*anicca*), intrinsic non-satisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and emptiness (*anattā*) of all phenomena (*dhmma*) (Vism 436–438). When wisdom (*paññā*) arises, phenomena are observed without identifying with them; instead, they are experienced from the standpoint of emptiness or non-self (*anattā*) (S III 1–5; 16–25), which is regarded as the portal for a deep transformation of consciousness, ultimately leading to liberation from delusion (*moha*) and suffering (*dukkha*). The ideal Buddhist ethical stance is thus grounded in a visceral understanding of emptiness and the consequent non-identification with any phenomena experienced, which means that there is no “individual” or “self” and thus no “other” (Ditrich 2022, 358). The Buddhist path is not about extinguishing the self, since this would imply the existence of an individual self in the first place. When wisdom (*paññā*) is present, questions about the existence of the self or non-self simply do not arise. This is also highlighted in the *Kaccānagotasutta* (S II 17):

For one who sees with right wisdom the origin of the world [of formations] as it is, there is no [notion of] non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees with right wisdom the cessation of the world [of formations] as it is, there is no [notion of] existence in regard to the world.⁸⁰

79 For a study of the Theravāda *Abhidhamma*, see especially Karunadasa (2010) and Bodhi (1993); a brief overview is given in Ditrich (2022, 376–85).

80 S II 17: *Lokasamudayaṃ kho Kaccāyana yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke natthitā sā na hoti. Lokanirodhaṃ kho Kaccāyana yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke atthitā sā na hoti.*

According to this model, in such moments no ethical guidelines are needed or are indeed even relevant, since mental states are thoroughly wholesome (*kusala*) and are automatically, without choice, followed by non-harmful speech or actions. In such states, conflict or violence is not possible, since, according to Buddhist analysis, every act of violence is grounded in and accompanied by the unwholesome roots of delusion (*moha*) and hatred (*dosa*), which are incompatible with wisdom (*paññā*); for example, in the *Atthasālinī* commentary (As 102), it is said: "Life-taking has two roots, due to hatred and delusion."⁸¹

As mentioned earlier, for wisdom (*paññā*) to arise the cultivation of virtue (*sīla*) is essential, especially non-violence or non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) toward all living beings (*pāṇa*) in this world as well as generosity (*dāna*), and practice of a wide range of types of meditation such as mindfulness (*satī*), friendliness (*mettā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). It is important to note, however, that the primary goal of such practices in early Buddhism, similar to Jainism and other ascetic movements of the time, was not the moral improvement of society but rather their spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), with one of the crucial conditions on the path to freedom being moral development, which would, as a by-product, benefit society and the natural environment. Ancient Buddhist ethics as described in the texts represents ideals that were probably pursued only to some extent in actual social practices, depending on the circumstances of a particular time and place. Though Buddhist teachings and ethics could be viewed to a large extent as non-anthropocentric, humans are nevertheless allotted a special place among all beings, as to be born human is regarded as the most advantageous birth, and thus desirable for achieving liberation.

After presenting an overview of the understanding of the term "living being" and its necessary link to ethics in early Buddhism, with its particular focus on transcending the world rather than engaging in it, this article will now explore the relevance of these models for addressing the ethical challenges of today's world. In the last few decades, marked by the growing awareness of the impoverishment and destruction of natural habitats along with innumerable species, it has been increasingly investigated how different religions may inspire and prompt, through their spiritual and cultural influences, new and more ecologically friendly attitudes toward the natural environment. In this process, ancient religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism⁸² have also responded to these environmental challenges, and in this process

81 As 102: *Mūlato ti pāṇātipātō dosamohavasena dvimūlako hoti*.

82 Jainism, for example, with its doctrine of total non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) toward and respect for a wide range of living beings, was originally practiced with the spiritual aim of liberation from *saṃsāra*. However, in the last few decades a considerable shift has emerged with a greater focus on environmental issues and participating in environmental movements, such as the protection of animal rights (Chapple 2002).

they have inevitably been reinterpreted to respond to contemporary questions and issues. In early Buddhism, the environmental issues of today's world did not exist, nor was there any apparent dichotomy of "man versus nature"; instead, human and non-human worlds were perceived as intrinsically interconnected. The relatively recent investigation of how Buddhist doctrine and ethics may contribute to changing our attitudes toward and views on the natural environment was facilitated by the earlier development of "modern Buddhism",⁸³ which started to evolve as early as the late nineteenth century, and gradually shifted its focus to increasing its engagement with (largely secular) society. In parallel, the ultimate aim of early Buddhism, namely, liberation from rebirth and entanglements in *samsāra*, more or less moved into the background, along with the sidelining of the associated renunciate models. With the growing awareness of the environmental crisis, especially in the last two decades, modern Buddhism has responded by building on and expanding its already well-established social engagement. Nevertheless, the currently emerging articulations of Buddhist environmental approaches draw from the fundamental teachings, including the four noble truths that position greed (*taṇhā*) as the root of suffering (*dukkha*), the three characteristics of all phenomena (i.e., impermanence, non-satisfactoriness, and non-self), and Buddhist virtue ethics, especially the moral precept to abstain from killing living beings.⁸⁴ The most prominent doctrinal models on which modern Buddhist environmental ethics is grounded are the formula of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the later Chinese Huayan School's teachings of interconnectedness, namely, that everything that exists is dependent on everything else that exists (i.e., the metaphor of Indra's net).⁸⁵ The latter model was particularly expounded by several modern Buddhist thinkers, such as Macy (1991) and Thich Nhat Hanh (2008), one of the earliest proponents of "engaged" Buddhism. Overall, the emerging outlines of a Buddhist environmental ethics have mainly focused on the cultivation of personal virtue and responsibility for the environment and much less on social ethics which, as Kaza (2018, 439–49) argues, is equally, if not more, important and would involve a range of social actions.

When exploring new approaches to ecological issues, the notion of non-self (*anattā*) or emptiness, which underpins Buddhist doctrine and is an essential component of Buddhist ethics, is less frequently examined and often sidelined. As shown above, the understanding of and insight into non-self (*anattā*) is the very foundation

83 The historical circumstances and main parameters involved in the making of modern Buddhism are presented and analysed in McMahan (2008).

84 For an overview of Buddhist environmental ethics, see Kaza (2018).

85 For a discussion on the relationship between the early Buddhist model of dependent origination and the later Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness, as developed in the Huayan School, see Anālayo (2021).

for a radically different perspective on the world: not only seeing the world as a web of interconnected living beings, but also deeply understanding that the world is ultimately empty of beings or individual entities. The model of dependent origination, as expounded in early Buddhism, can only be understood at the ultimate level from the position of non-self (*anattā*). This means that the flow of ever-changing experiences arising through the senses are viewed without an “I” as a reference point, without any identification with phenomena, which are instead seen as simply arising and passing away on their own. As discussed in this paper, the perspective of non-self (*anattā*) has radical ethical implications, as it is an ethical stance that excludes any form of unethical behaviour such as violence in thought, speech, and action. Early Buddhism thus propounds a very different standpoint from modern action-oriented approaches. With its ideal of wisdom and detachment grounded in non-self (*anattā*) and aiming to renounce the worldly life, it puts forward a stance that could be viewed, from the modern Western perspective, as (social) non-action. Yet this stance, which could be called “action in non-action, and non-action in action”,⁸⁶ is considered the very basis of ethics, wisdom, and compassion, as it excludes harming anything and thus benefits all beings. By way of cultivating virtue and practicing meditation, wisdom and the insight into non-self can evolve, which will automatically prevent any unwholesome and harmful actions toward the living environment. Social engagement can undoubtedly bring about social and environmental benefits. However, from the early Buddhist perspective, if such engagements occur with an incomplete understanding, notably without wisdom (*paññā*) and the insight into non-self (*anattā*), they may also bring about harm, especially when the methods applied to social issues are grounded in the very same paradigms and discourses that caused the problems in the first place.

Conclusion

By way of recapitulation, this paper explored the (rather underexamined) notion of a living being in Theravāda Buddhism. It showed that several Pāli terms were used to express this notion, pointing to its complex conceptualization, with each term having different, though overlapping, semantic ranges. It was proposed that *satta* refers to beings in general, whereas *pāṇa* designates “living being” mostly in reference to humans and animals in an ethical context. The more rarely attested term *bhūtagama* specifically signifies plants, to which relatively scant attention is given in the Theravāda sources, thus indicating that plants may have been called living beings, mainly in conformity with other religious traditions of the time.

⁸⁶ This is a frequently quoted phrase from the *Bhagavadgītā* IV.18.

Thereafter, the two perspectives of reality in Buddhism (i.e., conventional and ultimate) were outlined, with the concept of living being thus being situated therein. From the conventional perspective, there are living beings, and moral guidelines (*sīla*) are articulated in relation to them, but at the ultimate level, living beings do not exist as such, and instead, the lived experience is presented by different doctrinal models, which are all underpinned by the notion of non-self (*anattā*). It was then explored how, by way of wisdom (*paññā*), understood as a profound and non-conceptual insight into non-self (*anattā*), an ethical stance may emerge, which, by its very nature, excludes any possibility of engaging in harmful thoughts or actions.

Finally, this paper explored the potential contributions of early Buddhism (especially its understanding of living beings, non-self, and ethics) to the environmental challenges of today. It highlighted the essential role played by the Buddhist doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) as the very source and foundation of an ethical stance from which ethical actions develop. In conclusion, the notion of non-self or non-identity in early Buddhism may provide us with the opportunity to re-examine and rethink the dominant approaches currently used for confronting ethical issues, such as the environmental crisis, that impact our planet.

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OPEN LETTER

Open Letter to President Xi Jinping on the Climate Crisis



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in the HTML version of this paper are [here](#)

Vienna, 26 November 2022

President Xi Jinping
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Dear President Xi,

Please excuse my encroaching upon your valuable time, but the topic is urgent: the crisis with the climate, which will cause greater harm to China than to many other countries.

When you became General Secretary in 2012, I remember hoping that your advisers would brief you on the conclusions of the landmark report from the previous year by the China Economists 50 Forum and the Stockholm Environment Institute (along with the eminent climate economist Nicholas Stern). *The Economics of Climate Change in China: Toward a Low-Carbon Economy* showed how China could “phase out coal and still maintain economic growth and aspirations for development”. The authors concluded that, although a transition to a low-carbon economy would involve some costs up front and a loss of short-term profits, it would improve China’s energy security and strengthen its economy in the long run—not to mention help prevent the planet from burning.

Unfortunately, however, your government opted for short-term profitability and a continued reliance on coal. But ten years later, extreme weather worldwide clearly shows the huge risks of continuing to burn fossil fuels. Your advisers will have impressed upon you how much China will suffer from global heating, since the extremes of weather that have plagued the country recently will become steadily more frequent. Climate models predict that large parts of China will become uninhabitable if carbon emissions continue on anything like their current path, with hundreds of millions of people harmed and displaced by heatwaves, droughts, floods, and sea level rise.

Because of high levels of humidity due to centuries of irrigation, the North China Plain, which is one of the most densely populated regions on earth, will eventually become too hot for human beings to survive there. According to a study published in 2018 by researchers at MIT and the Singapore-MIT Alliance for Research and Technology, the North China Plain “faces the greatest risks to human life from rising temperatures of any location on Earth”.

The validity of this study was confirmed by the heatwaves that ravaged large swathes of China for seventy days this past summer, which according to the Chinese Meteorological Administration were the most extreme (“long duration, wide range, strong intensity”) since complete records began in 1961. One climate historian later called those heatwaves “the most severe recorded anywhere”.

Oceanographers have long been warning that global heating is causing sea level rise around the world, but for a number of reasons this is happening faster along China’s east coast than in most other places. A study of nine major coastal cities around the world found that Shanghai “stands out as the most exposed to coastal floods, mainly due to its high number of people living in flood-prone areas”. The National Marine Environmental Monitoring Centre of China reported that sea levels along the coast reached a record high in 2021.

Researchers from the Ministry of Natural Resources in Qingdao have recently discovered that the sea level along the coast of China is rising faster than the global average, a phenomenon confirmed by several other studies. As you know, some 60% of your country’s industry and 40% of the population are situated along the coast at low elevations, which means that sea level rise is going to wreak devastating economic and humanitarian havoc unless global heating is seriously mitigated. Rising seas will oblige many millions of people to move away from the coast. I wonder where they’ll go—certainly not to the North China Plain, where “wet bulb” temperatures will be too high for people to survive out of doors.

Rising seas are not the only water problem. The summer of 2021 saw deadly flooding in Henan province, when “the heaviest hour of rainfall ever reliably

recorded in China” fell on Zhengzhou, and the resulting floods killed several hundred people. A few months later, “the 59 observatories across Shanxi province all recorded historic levels of rain” thanks to three days of torrential downpours. Unsurprisingly, “Chinese meteorologists link such unpredictable weather patterns to the climate crisis”: and so the more we accelerate global heating by burning fossil fuels, the more frequent these extreme precipitation events will become. If you are inclined to believe that some new technology will be able to capture the carbon or suck it out of the air, please consult your scientific advisors, who will tell you that the putative “fixes” are not feasible. The costs would be astronomical, and it would be impossible to deploy them in time to avoid the worst.

But since, as you like to say, “humanity has increasingly emerged as a community of common destiny”, and since the climate crisis is unavoidably global in nature, China’s contribution to dealing with it won’t work without cooperation from the west, and the rest. And so it’s all the more sad that for our part we are also failing to confront the situation with the climate, in part because of a hyper-individualistic view of ourselves as human beings. A “wicked problem”, the climate crisis demands not just a few adjustments to our current worldview, but rather a radical *reframing* of our entire way of thinking. A recent book on the topic shows a number of ideas from Confucian and Daoist philosophy to be perfectly suited for such a reframing—and it turns out that you have cited most of these ideas in your speeches.

As a long-time student of classical Chinese philosophy, I believe that it would help enormously if we were to adopt and implement relevant ideas from the Chinese tradition. It was therefore encouraging when you began promoting “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as meaning a socialism grounded in ancient Chinese *philosophical* ideas. It seems to me that you have outlined in your early speeches as President a view of who and how we human beings are that would provide grounds for successful cooperation between China and the rest of the world on tackling the climate crisis—which is after all in the interests of every country on earth.

But let me first address an issue that tends to be a stumbling block in the way of good relations between your country and western nations. On the 95th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 (a response to the betrayal of China by the Triple Entente at the Versailles Peace Conference), you delivered a speech to students and faculty at Peking University. In the process of connecting the spirit of the May Fourth Movement with a long-standing Chinese “dream of a great national rejuvenation”, you recalled a nightmarish phase of the nation’s history, the “century of national humiliation”.

China used to be a world economic power. However, it missed its chance in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the consequent dramatic

changes, and thus was left behind and suffered humiliation under foreign invasion. Things got worse especially after the Opium War of the 1840s, when the nation was plagued by poverty and weakness, allowing others to trample upon and manipulate us. We must not let this tragic history repeat itself.

As a citizen of the United Kingdom, I have to admit that the Opium Wars were one of the most deplorable chapters in the long story of British imperial adventures overseas. As William Gladstone famously said of the First Opium War, in an address to Parliament at the time: he did not know of “a war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace”.

I also have to admit that the British diplomat most responsible for the outbreak of the Second Opium War, Sir Harry Smith Parkes, may be an ancestor of mine. His subsequent imprisonment by the Chinese in Beijing was a factor in the eventual, disgraceful looting and burning of the Yuanming Yuan. I uttered an unheard apology on my first visit to the ruins of those aptly named Gardens of Perfect Brightness in the 1980s, and apologise again to you now. Harry Parkes was apparently a capable diplomat in many respects, but also something of a hothead.

At any rate, I have to say I found the conclusion of your brief discussion at Peking University of the century of national humiliation quite encouraging: “China has stood up. It will never again tolerate being bullied by any nation. Yet it will never follow in the footsteps of the big powers, which seek hegemony once they grow strong. Our country is following a path of peaceful development.” Many commentators were delighted to learn that your government was going to continue the commitment of your predecessor Hu Jintao to China’s peaceful development.

I do wish the powers that colonised China in the nineteenth century would issue formal apologies, so that we could all move on. If critics of China could acknowledge the wrongs of that imperialism, the ultranationalist Chinese would no longer have grounds for grudges. Awareness of those wrongs would also grant us westerners a broader perspective on what is happening with Hong Kong. We rightly stand in solidarity with the protestors there because—to speak frankly—your government is no longer honouring the “two systems” part of the “one country, two systems” principle. But on our side we need to understand that many Chinese are wondering where that second, foreign system came from in the first place. What on earth were the British doing in Hong Kong in the mid-nineteenth century? Nothing very honourable, I’m afraid.

One of the most reassuring features of your Peking University speech was the announcement that your government would “carry forward the core socialist values

through absorbing the rich nourishment of Chinese culture, so as to invigorate its vitality and broaden its influence”. You then treated your audience to twenty quotations from the ancient Chinese classics, among which were Confucius’s exhortation to be “true in word and resolute in deed”, and his question, “If a man does not keep his word, what is he good for?”

Standing by one’s word is of course a key virtue for the Confucians, and one that is sadly rare among political leaders these days. But your endorsement of Confucian sincerity would give readers of your book *The Governance of China* reason to suppose that you would follow through on the “philosophy of the new central leadership” articulated in your speeches from 2012 to 2014. After all, it would be awkward, and lead to loss of face, to turn out to be professing Confucian philosophy insincerely.

You went on to quote the ancient adage, “Harmony of Nature and the Human”, which refers to an original harmony, since lost, but eminently worth regaining. The practical implication is that human activities tend to fail when they conflict with the powers of Heaven and Earth, and are more likely to succeed when integrated with them. Our insistence on burning fossil fuels, pursuing massive deforestation, and raising cattle on an industrial scale generates a volume of greenhouse gas emissions that is throwing off the Earth’s energy balance, disrupting the dynamic harmony that prevailed during the Holocene Era. The urgent task is to restore the harmony among the Heavens, the human world, and the Earth as much as we can.

You returned to the topic of “the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature” a couple of years later, invoking the ideas of Frederick Engels: “According to materialistic dialectics ... the world is an interrelated whole and an interactive system.” You then emphasise that “human development activities must respect, accommodate, and protect nature; otherwise nature will retaliate against us”. To illustrate the point, you paraphrase that wonderful passage in *Dialectics of Nature* where Engels gives an account of civilisations that ignored the principle of protecting nature (in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and Europe) and suffered dire consequences as a result.

You go on to list some major twentieth-century environmental disasters in the West, followed by a series of environmental abuses in the history of China up to the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, coming to this eminently sensible conclusion: “We must take warning from these cases.” These are salutary reminders indeed—alongside the devastating consequences of Mao Zedong’s “war against nature”, which began with the Great Leap Forward. As you yourself then say, quoting Engels: “Let us not flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory, nature takes its revenge on us.”

You then show how these ideas of Engels are anticipated in the ancient Chinese classics, citing relevant passages from the *Analects* of Confucius, the masterpiece by the third great Confucian thinker *Xunzi*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of *Lü Buwei*. The gist of these texts is that human activities such as fishing, hunting, and tree-cutting need to be practised *sustainably* (to use a modern term), so as not to deplete the natural resources on which our existence depends. These are wonderful and timely ideas, and all the more pertinent in the light of your demonstration of their compatibility with Marxist socialism on these topics. It's hard to think of many world leaders who promote such beneficial notions from the classics in their public pronouncements.

I also can't think of many world leaders whose ambition for the country is to make it into "a modestly prosperous society", rather than an opulent paradise of consumerism. Your often-stated opposition to "hedonism and extravagance and waste" is correspondingly absent from political rhetoric in most western countries. This attitude is perfectly in line with the Confucian encouragement of modesty and restraint (though not to the point of asceticism), and the Daoists' promotion of sufficiency and their warnings against excess.

Your emphasis on moderation, which also comes from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, is perfect for our present era, now that we've brought the age of planetary abundance to an end. It's a pity that the Chinese middle classes have fallen for consumerism in such a big way, and I hope the Party can persuade them that the pursuit of greater wealth and ever more pleasure is a dead end—and that natural limits will in any case put an end to excessive levels of consumption.

In a speech to the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2013, you addressed the question of how to "improve the country's resource management system". You reminded your audience that the people together with "mountains, waters, forests, farmlands and lakes form a living community", and emphasised that "to control the exploitation of natural resources and restore ecosystems, we must follow the laws of nature". This allusion to the *Laozi* (ch. 25) sums up the Daoist attitude perfectly: human activities meet with success when they follow the ways of the greater powers of Heaven and Earth, which in turn exemplify the spontaneous patterning of *dao*.

I was interested to learn that when you inspected flood control measures in Anhui province in August of 2020, you again recommended "following the laws of nature" in dealing with flooding, and praised the legendary Emperor Yu's sensible "way of dealing with water". This echoes the passage in the *Mencius* where Yu is praised for taming the floods by "following water's natural ways". Your attitude is a welcome change from former president Jiang Zemin's, who during a ceremony

at the Three Gorges Dam dismayed ecologically-minded academics in China by triumphantly repeating the Maoist slogan: “The human must conquer nature”.

And I must say you dismayed this academic here in Vienna when you said in a recent speech that “China’s low-carbon ambitions must not interfere with normal life”—because extremes of weather are *already* interfering with normal life for many millions of Chinese! One thinks of the maxim from Emperor Yu that you cited as the first of your twenty “quotations from ancient classics” at Peking University: “The people are the basis of the state.” (You omitted the beginning of the dictum: “The emperor must cherish the people and never abuse them.”)

The ruler’s obligation to “take good care of the people” is also just what Marxist socialism demands when applied to Chinese conditions. The Party must be, as you often say, “dedicated to serving the people”. This is quite in keeping with the ancient Chinese idea that the emperor as the Son of Heaven must take care of the people—as the basis of the state—as if they were his own children. If he fails, it will be a sign that he has lost the Mandate of Heaven and it is time for a new regime.

Ever since Emperor Yu’s success in taking care of the floodwaters, rulers in China have been granted legitimacy on their ability to manage the power of water so as to ensure the welfare of the people. And insofar as the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party depends on its taking good care of the people, it had better not ignore or downplay the danger of global heating, which is already inflicting considerable harm on millions of Chinese citizens.

Going back to your twenty quotations: several of them show how good government is an extension of the well-functioning family, and is based on the maxim that Confucius said is the “single thread” running throughout his teaching: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.” If more people were to practise this “negative” formulation of the Golden Rule, the world would be a far better place. So much of what goes wrong stems from one group’s blaming another group for what are in fact its own failings, and laying upon others the burden of “shaping up”. As Mencius said, “The trouble with people is that they neglect their own fields in order to weed the fields of others.” The good ruler, by contrast, is concerned to rectify his own shortcomings and take into account the situation and perspectives of the people.

You yourself cite Mencius when he says: “Treat the elders of other families well, as well as you would treat your own”, and also (he adds) “treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families”. This principle (also to be found in Confucius) of extending the love that one naturally has for members of immediate family to more distant relatives, and then farther, is an eminently sensible basis for political philosophy and good government.

As Confucius said, citing the *Classic of History*: “Simply by being a good son, and friendly to his brothers, a man can exert an influence on government.”

Naturally you included in the twenty quotations the key principle in Confucian political philosophy: “Govern the people through virtuosity and educate them through ritual propriety.” You don’t cite what Confucius then said, which is that people “will then order themselves” spontaneously, with no need for coercion on the part of government. For the Confucians, the idea is to lead by example rather than govern by enforcement, fixing one’s own faults in order to set an example for others. As you suggested earlier in your Peking University speech, this kind of virtuous governance is only attainable through assiduous self-cultivation. Paraphrasing the well-known passage in the *Great Learning*, you talk of how “cultivating oneself, managing the family, and governing the state” can eventually in full extension “safeguard peace for All under the Heavens”.

For the Daoists as well as the Confucians, the best way to govern is non-coercively, by having those in power become stellar examples that people will be naturally drawn to follow. By extension into interstate relations, the Central Kingdom was to use the power of its virtuosity (especially in governing) to draw surrounding states into its orbit, rather than expanding the Empire by deploying military force. This is basically a matter of what we in the West call “soft power”—a phenomenon I know you are interested in.

But let me go back to the issue of being “trustworthy in word”, which figured in two of your twenty quotations and is confirmed by Confucius’s insistence that the true gentleman is ashamed if his actions fail to measure up to his words. On the positive side, the Party has continued the impressive achievements under previous leaders of helping the poor in China to get out of poverty. It is also taking good care of the people by reducing pollution of the air, water, and soil—although the appalling environmental legacy of the Mao era will take a long time to rectify. People can also be grateful for a reduction in government corruption, even if punishments may have fallen disproportionately on your political rivals or enemies.

On the negative side, some of your recommendations deriving from ancient Chinese wisdom are now being directly contradicted by the Party’s actions. In the first few speeches in *The Governance of China*, you acknowledged the importance of *diversity* for a thriving culture, and applauded the long history of Chinese people “creating a homeland where all ethnic groups live in harmony”. You praised their success over millennia in keeping together “the fifty-six ethnic groups” that comprise the population. The third of your twenty quotations cites a key notion in Confucian philosophy, “Harmony rather than uniformity”, which you later develop in the context of “a world with different cultures, ethnic groups, skin colours,

religions and social systems”. There you quote from the Confucian classics in celebrating the richness that comes from harmonious blending of diverse flavours in cooking and diverse sounds in music.

Addressing the thirteenth National People’s Congress in 2018, you assured the audience: “We have developed harmonious relationships among fifty-six diverse but closely interwoven ethnic groups. We have formed one great Chinese family where all care for and help each other.” That’s certainly the traditional ideal—but the Tibetans and the Uyghurs would ridicule the pretence that the CCP has made any effort to realise it. Yes, Tibet and Xinjiang have been difficult to govern, but that is no excuse for erasing Tibetan and Uyghur culture from the grand harmony that you claim China represents.

It’s interesting that you cite in your speeches maxims of Confucian and Daoist political philosophy that advocate non-coercive government, but you only once quote the radically opposed Legalist philosopher Han Fei (and then on a neutral topic). Legalist philosophy regards the Confucian view as hopelessly idealistic, and encourages the ruler to use whatever brute force may be required to stay in power, and employ coercion and punishments (along with occasional rewards) in order to maintain order.

The neighbours along your borders and around the South China Sea might be forgiven for thinking that your speeches on “China’s Peaceful Development” ring a little hollow, and that you are actually following hardline Legalist principles rather than the Confucian philosophy you claim to espouse. And may I be forgiven for remarking that the only imperial dynasty to enact Legalist political philosophy, the Qin—infamous for burning books and burying scholars—was the shortest-lived in Chinese history? A mere fifteen years by contrast with 276 for both the Ming and Ching dynasties.

The Chinese people will surely flourish better if the Party stays with Marxist socialism, which is compatible with the ancient Chinese ideas you want as a foundation, rather than lurching into Leninism, which corresponds with Legalism, and even into Stalinism. Neither Lenin nor Stalin was a thinker, nor was their Chinese follower Mao Zedong (especially by contrast with the subtlety of Han Fei), and the regimes of Stalin and Mao signally failed to benefit the many millions of people who died of starvation under them.

Marx and Engels wanted people above all to be free: liberated from the chains imposed by ruthless capitalists, and free for more fulfilling work than capitalism generally offers. Quite in the spirit of the ancient Chinese thinkers, the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* promoted a politics that encourages *association*, “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of

all”. The free development of human capacities is not something one immediately associates with life in China today.

Another venerable feature of the Chinese polity for millennia was the practice of *remonstrance*, as encouraged by both Confucius and Mencius. If the emperor was about to do something reckless, or was failing to act when necessary, his ministers were duty-bound to advise him—diplomatically—of the right course of action. This roughly corresponds to the western system of checks and balances among separated powers of government. It apparently used to be customary among members of the Chinese Communist Party to question and to dissent where appropriate, but nowadays doubters and dissenters are simply not tolerated.

This is the problem when a supreme leader arrogates too much power to himself: nobody dares to disagree, and so he gets trapped in an echo chamber of his own opinions, a hall of mirrors reflecting his own views. This is what is happening to your “no limits” friend Vladimir Putin, and it’s not turning out well for him, or the rest of us. I’m afraid your insistence on the zero-Covid policy, in the face of most scientific advice, is not going to turn out well either. As you yourself have said, “it is not easy to govern a country of 1.3 billion people”, and so any sensible leader will be open to good advice from others in his circle.

As far as I can tell, you already have more than enough power, and until recently you enjoyed a high level of popular support domestically, coming across as an upright character untainted by corruption. To the extent that your anti-corruption drive has succeeded, your colleagues in government will also be upright and conscientious. You frequently talk about the need for the ruler and top members of the Party to be competent and benefit the governed, and to develop through self-cultivation such a level of virtuosity that people are naturally drawn to follow their example. So why not *trust* the Confucian soft power of your collective moral authority and discontinue the Legalist programme of domestic coercion and suppression of dissenting voices? You could think of it as soft power with Confucian characteristics.

That great political thinker Xunzi, whom you occasionally cite, memorably quoted a traditional maxim that warns of the perils of instability for the ship of state: “The lord is the boat; his subjects the water. / It’s the water that sustains the boat, / and the water that capsizes the boat.” If you expose the people to a surplus of water in the form of floods and sea level rise, you will appear to have lost the Mandate of Heaven, and be at risk of capsizing. There will be calls for a leader who can take better care of the people in the long run.

Nor is it sufficient to take care of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions domestically, since we’re talking about *global* heating as the cause of these problems. As you like to remind the audience of your speeches, “China will thrive

only when the world prospers”, because “this is a world where countries are linked with, and dependent on, one another at a level never seen before”. Since the world of today is indeed, as you say, “an interrelated whole”, you have to pursue solutions that go beyond the nation, and interlinked countries, to All under the Heavens.

China wants to be respected as a great power, and you have often called for a strengthening of Chinese “cultural soft power” to achieve that aim. “Soft power” is just a western formulation of the Confucian idea that the good ruler leads by example rather than governing by coercion, and that a state is great when it attracts others by the beauty of its governance. That is surely the way to go, rather than the coercive Legalist route, since continuing domestic oppression and aggression abroad will guarantee a massive loss of soft power, as foreign observers are repelled by the ugliness of Chinese governance—in spite of your three volumes of speeches praising its beauty.

The absence of any serious climate leadership from the world’s former hegemon, the United States, opens the way for China to lead global action to cope with the climate crisis. In your speech to the CPC National Congress in 2017, you said the country was “taking the driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change”. The world is waiting for the sound of the engine starting. If you were to follow ancient Chinese wisdom in taking the lead on slowing global heating for the long-term benefit of the Chinese people, you would in one stroke legitimise the Party’s rule *and* gain the gratitude of the whole world and the greatest soft-power triumph in human history.

I’m sorry, I’ve already taken up more of your time than I wanted to. So let me finish by wishing you all the very best in continuing to work for the well-being of people in China and beyond.



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ASLAN STUDIES IN SLOVENIA

Daoistični ekohumanizem in pristnost naravnega življenja onkraj deontološke etike

Jana S. ROŠKER*

Izvleček

V zadnjem času se veliko del posveča znanstvenemu razumevanju in interpretacijam kompleksnosti daoistične tradicije. Sem sodi tudi kritično raziskovanje njenega prispevka k aktualnim okoljskim vprašanjem. Avtorica v tem prispevku razmišlja o presečišču daoističnega humanizma in ekologije ter izpostavi teoretske in zgodovinske implikacije, povezane z daoističnim pristopom do okolja. Ta izhodišča nam lahko veliko povedo o tem, kako se daoistično filozofsko razmišljanje lahko uspešno povezuje s humanizmom ter z vedami o ekologiji in okolju. Članek prikazuje možnost alternativnega pogleda na svet, ki nam lahko pomaga, da v svojem omejenem času in prostoru vendarle najdemo možnost živeti nekakšen trajnostni in hkrati tukaj-in-zdajšnji trenutek. Avtorica pri tem izhaja iz nekaterih ključnih vprašanj, ki jih najdemo v klasičnih besedilih. S svojimi analizami razmišlja o morebitni uporabnosti klasične daoistične misli in prakse na Kitajskem in Zahodu tako glede na sodobno ekološko krizo kot tudi glede na vlogo in položaj človeka znotraj narave in družbe.

Ključne besede: daoizem, ekološki humanizem, ekohumanizem, pristnost, etika, ekologija

Daoist Eco-Humanism and the Authenticity of Natural Life beyond Deontological Ethics

Abstract

Recently, much work has been put into the scholarly understanding and interpretation of the complexities of the Daoist tradition. This includes a critical exploration of its contribution to contemporary environmental issues. In this paper, the author reflects on the intersection of Daoist humanism and ecology and highlights the theoretical and historical implications associated with the Daoist approach to the environment. These starting points can tell us much about how Daoist philosophical thought can be successfully connected to humanism and the sciences of ecology and the environment. The article points to the possibility of an alternative worldview that can help us, in our limited time and space, nonetheless find the possibility of living some kind of sustainable yet here-and-now moment. In doing so, the author starts from some key questions found in classical

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texts. Through her analyzes, she examines the potential applicability of classical Daoist thought and practice in China and in the West, both in relation to the modern ecological crisis and to the role and place of human beings within nature and society.

Keywords: Daoism, ecological humanism, eco-humanism, authenticity, ethics, ecology

Uvod

Pričujoči članek temelji na iskanju takšnih podob ekološkega humanizma, ki omogočajo, da ugledamo svet kot celoto: ne kot hibriden enodimenzionalen globus, ki poudarja razlike med nami, temveč prej kot naš planet, ki nam omogoča tudi razumevanje in razvoj tistega, kar nam je vsem skupno.

A preden se podrobneje posvetimo samemu diskurzu ekološkega humanizma, ki je nastal pod okriljem daoizma in njegovih diskurzov o človeku in njegovi svobodi ter njegovi vpetosti v okolje, si oglejmo splošno situacijo, v kateri so se tovrstni diskurzi sploh oblikovali.

Svobodna celovitost človeškega življenja in njegova avtonomija v pred-Qinskem obdobju nista bili zgolj v monopolni lasti daoističnih idej. Tudi v delih zgodnjega izvornega konfucijanstva so bile ideje o vpetosti človeka v celokupno enoto vesolja in narave pogosto v ospredju. A po tem, ko je v dinastiji Han prišlo do prve reforme konfucijanstva in se je iz tega izvorno naprednega nauka postopoma oblikovala mnogo strožja ideologija oziroma državna doktrina konfucianizma, je ta ideologija prevladala in s svojo birokratsko institucionalno podlago prevzela oblast v vsej kitajski državi vse do začetka 20. stoletja, ko je bil odpravljen sistem uradniških izpitov. V okviru te ideologije je tudi etika odnosnosti postala veliko bolj konservativna, normativna in rigidna. Avtonomni posameznik in prej veliko svobodnejša posameznica sta bila v tej ideologiji odrinjena v ozadje, njuno svobodo in avtonomijo pa so nadomestili formalni mehanizmi uradnih družbenih regulacij, okostenelih obredov in na strogi hierarhiji temelječe avtokracije.

Svoboda in avtonomija sta se ohranili zgolj v idejah daoizma, ki so preživele na obrobju uradno sprejetih diskurzov; daoistična filozofija pa je ostala med kitajskimi izobraženci in izobraženkami vseskozi precej priljubljena, četudi so jo ljudje največkrat brali in o njej debatirali zgolj v prostem času ali pa so jo izvajali z različnimi metodami eremitskega pobega iz konfucianistične družbe in njenih doktrin.

Zato bi bomo v tem prispevku pogledali, v čem se je daoistična etika, ki predstavlja osnovo ekološkega humanizma, kakršen se je razvil v teh diskurzih, razlikovala od prevladujoče konfucijanske etike vlog oziroma relacij.

Tri vrste harmonije

Kadar koli spregovorimo o antičnem (pa tudi o tradicionalnem) kitajskem humanizmu, najprej pomislimo na konfucijanstvo; njegovi pogledi na posameznika kot temeljni koncept stvarstva in resničnosti se precej razlikujejo od konfucijanskih. Kot smo videli, se je humanizem v okviru antičnega konfucijanstva vzpostavil kot reakcija na nerazumnost in preživelost naravnih religij; v tem okviru se je oblikoval kot vrsta kulture, v središču katere je se je nahajal človek, skupaj s svojo človekostjo (*ren xing*), ki je bila tesno povezana z razvojem, izgrajevanjem in kultivacijo človečnosti (*ren*).

Kulturna komponenta je torej tista, ki najjasneje določa konfucijanski humanizem. A če si kitajski humanizem ogledamo skozi dihotomijo razmerja med naravo in kulturo, bomo videle, da se je v neki – četudi precej drugačni – obliki razvil tudi v okviru tiste šole, ki je znotraj te dihotomije (za razliko od konfucijanske) zagovarjala prvi koncept, torej idejo narave. In to je bila prav šola daoizma. Daoizem se deli na religiozni in klasični oziroma filozofski, ki se med seboj močno razlikujeta. V sklopu pričujočega članka se bomo osredotočile na slednjega.

Eden najbolj znanih sodobnih predstavnikov teoretskega neodaoizma Chen Guying meni, da se daoistični humanizem med drugim kaže v treh oblikah harmonije, ki jih najprej opiše negativno, s tem, da si od Bertranda Russella izposodi njegovo analizo »treh vrst konfliktov« (Chen 2018, 50), v katere je človek nenehno vpet in se jim ne more izogniti. Pri tem gre

1. za konflikt med človekom in naravo,
2. za konflikt med človekom in človekom ter
3. za notranji konflikt človeka v sebi.

Chen izpostavi, da tudi daoisti poznajo vse tri zgoraj omenjene ravni nasprotij, a jih poskušajo razrešiti z iskanjem skladja oziroma harmonije med njimi. *Zhuan-gzi*¹ te tri vrste harmonije poimenuje takole:

1. *Tianhe* (harmonija narave/neba),
2. *Renhe* (harmonija človeka) in
3. *Xinhe* (harmonija srčne zavesti)

1 V knjigi *Zhuangzi* najdemo te tri vrste harmonije v naslednjih poglavjih:

1. *Tianhe* (*Zhuangzi* s. d., Waipian, Neidao, 1; *Zhibei you* 3; *Zapian*, *Geng-san chu*, 19);
2. *Renhe* (*Zhuangzi* s. d., Neipian, *Jiwulun*, 6; *Waipian*, *Tiandao*, 1);
3. *Xinhe* (*Zhuangzi* s. d., Neipian, *Renjian shi*, 4).

Harmonija narave je pri tem osrednjega pomena, saj predstavlja predpogoj za integracijo obeh drugih oblik skladja, torej (med)človeške harmonije in harmonije človeške notranjosti (oziroma, po kitajskem vokabularju, harmonije srčne zavesti; gl. Chen 2018, 50).

Biti v skladu (v harmoniji) z naravo namreč konec koncev ne pomeni nič drugega kot biti v harmoniji z ljudmi. Biti v harmoniji z ljudmi pomeni povezati se z njimi, kar zopet vodi do družbenega miru, ki se kaže v splošnem ravnovesju med ljudmi in naravo (ibid., 52). Daoistični humanizem je po svojem bistvu vsekakor ekološki, saj poudarja odvisnost človeka od narave. Četudi je človek kot tak – zaradi svoje refleksivne srčne zavesti – v ospredju in hkrati v središču vsega bivajočega, pa je vendar izgubljen in mrtev, kakor hitro se poskuša oddaljiti od celovitosti narave ter poskuša delovati v nasprotju z njenim krogotokom, torej z *daotom*, ki je gonilo življenja in tudi izvor vsakega človeka kot živega bitja.

Seveda ima soskladje ali harmonija prav posebno mesto tudi v konfucijanstvu (gl. npr. *Lunyu* s. d., Xue'er, 12), kar ni čudno, glede na to, da tudi konfucijanci in konfucijanke na vse pretege razglašajo pomen ravnovesja, po katerem se imenuje celo eden od klasikov konfucianističnega kanona (*Zhong yong*). Kljub temu obstaja velika razlika med temeljno opredelitvijo (in naravnostjo) harmonije v enem in v drugem diskurzu, zlasti kar se tiče odnosa človeka do tega soskladja. Medtem ko je človek prvega diskurza kultiviran »navzven« in si mora preko svoje notranje avtonomije kar naprej prizadevati za to, da to ravnovesje doseže, mora človek daoizma, ki je – četudi še vedno v ospredju – od kozmosa v bistvu neločljiv, ostajati zvest svoji temeljni paradigmi nedelovanja, kar pomeni, da ne sme posegati v tek *daota*, ki uravnava bivanje, če ne želi, da bi se to ravnovesje podrlo, se izgubilo. Ta poudarek najdemo v vseh klasičnih delih daoizma in se kot eden temeljnih motivov pojavlja tako v Laozijevem *Daode jingu*, kot tudi v *Zhuangziju*.

Daoizem je pojem harmonije obogatil tudi z estetskimi komponentami, ki jih je vnesel vanj. Pri tem velja omeniti predvsem *Zhuangzija*. Ta dodatna in nadvse pomembna razsežnost se kaže v mnogih metaforah, ki jih najdemo denimo v njegovem »postenju srčne zavesti« (*xin zhai*),² v »sedenju v pozabi« (*zuo wang*)³ in v »zakladnici duhovnosti« (*ling fu*).⁴ Svoj najjasnejši izraz pa najde ta viso-

2 Gl. npr.: »To je zgolj postenje, primerno obrednemu žrtvovanju. To ni postenje srčne zavesti. [...] Praznina – to je postenje srčne zavesti.« (是祭祀之齋，非心齋也。[...] 虛者，心齋也。) (Zhuangzi s. d., Neipian, Renjian shi, 2)

3 Gl. npr.: »Zapustiti svojo zunanjo obliko, odvreči vse znanje in se spojiti z vsem, kar neovirano teče, temu pravimo sedenje v pozabi.« (離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘。) (Zhuangzi s. d., Neipian, Da zongshi, 9)

4 Gl. npr.: »Kdor ne zmore drsenja v soskladju, nima vstopa v zakladnico duhovnosti.« (故不足以滑和，不可入於靈府。) (Zhuangzi s. d., Neipian, De chung fu, 4)

ko estetizirana harmonija bivanja, v kateri je človek nenehno in nedoumljivo v skorajda mističnem, četudi hkrati povsem vsakdanjem soskladju tako s samim seboj kot tudi z naravo in vso zunanjo resničnostjo, v pojmu neobremenjenega in brezskrbnega lebdenja srčne zavesti (*you xin*). Tako nam Zhuangzi svetuje skozi usta Brezimnega, ki ga nekdo po imenu Tiangen⁵ povpraša po tem, kako naj deluje v svetu. Brezimni je zaradi plehkosti vprašanja sprva nejevoljen, a mu naposled le odgovori, rekoč:

汝遊心於淡。

Naj tvoja srčna zavest brezskrbno in neobremenjeno zalebdi v pustosti.
(Zhuangzi s. d., Naipian, Ying diwang, 3)

V pustosti ni želja, še manj pa strasti ali hrepenenja po posedovanju, obvladovanju česarkoli, kar je del zunanjega sveta. Četudi se nam pri branju tovrstnih pasaj na prvi pogled lahko zazdi, da gre pri njih za čisti eskapizem, to vendarle ne drži. Tako kot daoističnega koncepta nedelovanja (*wuwei*) nikakor ne moremo enačiti s pasivnostjo oziroma s tem, da nič ne počnemo, tudi lebdenje srčne zavesti nikakor ni zgolj pasivna nedejavnost. Za razliko od prej omenjenega koncepta *zuo wang*, pri katerem gre dejansko za mirovanje (zunanjega telesa), gre pri konceptu *you xin* za izrazito dinamičen koncept, ki pa ga spremlja nenehna težnja po ohranjanju odsotnosti intencije.

To je lebdenje, ki nam omogoča uvid in vstop v vmesne prostore, ki jih logika racionalnosti ne more doseči niti obvladati:

遊心於堅白同異之間。

Neobremenjeno lebdenje se dogaja med trdoto in belino, med identiteto in diferenco. (Zhuangzi s. d., Waipian, Pianmu, 1)

Za boljše razumevanje gornjega citata naj mimogrede omenim, da gre tako pri »trdoti in belini« (*jianbai*) kot pri »identiteti in diferenci« (*tongyi*) za teoretska diskurza, s katerima sta se v svojih logičnih disputih ukvarjali moistična (*Mo jia*) in nomenalistična šola (*Ming jia*). Pri prvem gre za definicijo razmerja med substanco in lastnostmi objektov, pri drugem pa (kot že ime pove) za določitev razmerja med identiteto in diferenco.

Samo v teh vmesnih prostorih, torej onkraj strogih zamejitev semantičnih konotacij in logičnih predpisov, je možno doseči stanje, v katerem človek ponovno najde svojo pristno človeškost.

5 Tudi to ime je po vsej verjetnosti metafora, saj pomeni »korenine narave/neba«.

Kot smo že omenili, je bila človeška integriteta in sam človek kot pristen posameznik, posameznica v ospredju teh nauk. Če pa dojemamo etiko kot normativen mehanizem, ki določa in ureja medčloveške in medosebne odnose na formalen način, potem ni gotovo, ali pri daoizmu sploh lahko govorimo o filozofiji, ki bi vsebovala tudi etične komponente.

Če pri tem izhajamo iz klasičnih del dveh osrednjih pionirskih predstavnikov daoistične filozofije, katerih ideje se manifestirajo v delih *Laozi* in *Zhuangzi*, potem lahko rečemo, da je bila ena temeljnih razlik med njima prav v tem, na kakšen način sta ti besedili predstavljali ter dojemali moralo ter etiko. Medtem ko najdemo v *Laoziju* še precej elementov družbene etike, in sicer predvsem v drugem delu te knjige, ki pogosto govori o razmerju med družbo in vladarjem ter daje slednjemu tudi obilo napotkov za dobro vladanje, se zdi *Zhuangzi* na prvi pogled izrazito amoralen. Če pa se temu delu posvetimo na nekoliko bolj kompleksen način, lahko v njem vendarle zaznamo tudi etiko, v ospredju katere je človek in njegova intersubjektivnost, etiko, ki je v bistvu veliko bolj zanimiva in prodorna kot Laozjieve preprostejše in bolj enodimenzionalne premise morale nedelovanja (*wu wei*).

Zanimanje za Zhuangzijevo etiko se je pri raziskovalcih in raziskovalkah etičnih teorij vzbudilo predvsem s prepородom etike vrlin, do katerega je prišlo v zadnjih desetletjih, ko so ljudje pričeli vse bolj dvomiti v primernost deontološke etike, ki temelji na poslušnosti, izpolnjevanju ukazov ter podrejanju rigidnim družbenim pravilom in predpisom. Z roko v roki s tem prepородom se je vzbudilo tudi zanimanje za elemente etike vrlin, ki jih lahko najdemo v idejnih tradicijah, ki so se razvile izven starogrških filozofij, na primer v hinduizmu, konfucijanstvu in budizmu. A tudi pri tem je ostala daoistična in zlasti *Zhuangzijeve* etika v ozadju, saj je to delo dolgo veljalo za odraz radikalnega relativizma in skepticizma, zaradi česar so v njem videli knjigo, ki ne nudi nikakršnih vodil za moralno izpopolnjevanje življenja. Šele v zadnjih letih so nekateri raziskovalci in raziskovalke etike pričele v njem odkrivati določen tip normativnosti, ki bi lahko sodila v domeno vrlinske etike (gl. npr. Huang 2010). Osrednja vrlina, ki so jo pri tem opazile, in ki je nedvomno v ospredju tega dela, je spoštovanje različnosti in drugačnosti. Pri tem gre zagotovo za tematiko, ki je izjemno aktualna tudi v današnjem globaliziranem svetu in njegovih vse bolj pluralnih družbah.

Sistemi vrlinske etike so zelo raznoliki, vsem pa je skupno poudarjanje naravnosti, odsotnosti napora, lahkotnosti in zadovoljnosti subjekta, ki izvaja moralna dejanja. Vse to nas seveda takoj spomni na Zhuangzijevega »resničnega človeka«.

Resnični človek

»Resnični človek« (*zhen ren*), je tisto človeško bitje, ki v daoističnih diskurzih dejansko stoji v središču bivanja; ta človek je imanenten, saj v ničemer ne presega zemlje, na kateri stoji in v kateri je zakoreninjeno njegovo življenje. A hkrati v njem ni ničesar, kar bi ga vezalo na tegobe in bolečine tega sveta. V sebi nosi transcendenco in se dotika vsega, kar je na nebu svetega. V tem smislu je podoben Kekcu iz pesmi Kajetana Koviča, ki nosi v eni roki sonce, v drugi pa zlati smeh.

To je človek, ki nebu in vsej naravi ni zgolj blizu, ampak je z njo eno. Zato je v njem tudi neskončna modrost, ki nam razkriva vse skrivnosti veseljstva.

庸詎知吾所謂天之非人乎？所謂人之非天乎？且有真人，而後有真知。

Le kdo naj poreče, da nebo (narava) ni isto kot človek? In da ni neba (narave) v človeku? Resnični človek zagotovo obstaja in z njim obstaja resnično znanje. (Zhuangzi s. d., Neipian, Da zongshi, 1)

Ta idealni človek v marsičem spominja na Nietzschejevega »nadčloveka«, ki je v položaju superiornosti zgolj zaradi tega, ker je eden od redkih ljudi, ki so se osvobodili egocentrizma, skupaj z vsemi lažmi, strahovi in pritlehnimi vzgibi, ki so z njim povezani. Zhuangzi opisuje resničnega človeka kot nekoga, ki mu lahko sicer zavidamo, saj je v njem nekaj navidezno nadnaravnega

古之真人，其寢不夢，其覺無憂，其食不甘，其息深深。

Resnični človek starodavnih dni je ta, čigar spanec je brez sanj. In ko je buden, je brez skrbi. Njegova hrana je pusta in njegov dih globok. (ibid.)

In vendar gre za stanje duha, ki ga lahko doseže vsak od nas, nepopolnežev in nepopolnic. Gre za človeka, ki v bistvu živi zelo preprosto, a hkrati pristno življenje, v katerem ne potrebuje ničesar, kar presega njegove vitalne potrebe in funkcije.⁶

6 V svojem članku o pomenu večšin v *Zhuangziju* Dušan Vávra (2017, 29) poudarja, da vključuje pojem resničnega človeka tudi popolno neodvisnost od česarkoli, kar se tiče človeške družbe, in da prihaja to do izraza v daoistični frazi »ne uporabljaj človeka za pomoč naravi« (不以人助天). David Chai (2023, 251) pa po drugi strani izpostavlja, da je to bitje brez sebstva, brez uma in brez znanja, saj bi vse to kvarilo njegovo pristnost in spontanost ter s tem prekinilo njegovo enost z zunanjo naravo in *daotom*. Vse aktivnosti, ki nam polnijo um, blokirajo naše poenotenje z naravo in naše spontano sledenje pranačelu *dao* (Wheeler 2022, 440).

何謂真人？古之真人，不逆寡，不雄成，不謨士。若然者，過而弗悔，當而不自得也。若然者，登高不慄，入水不濡，入火不熱。是知之能登假於道也若此。

Kaj pravzaprav pomeni resnični človek? Resnični človek pradavnih dni nikoli ne nasprotuje manjšinam in ne povečuje herojskih dosežkov. On ne kuje načrtov za lastno slavo. In ker je tak, ničesar ne obžaluje, tudi če je kdaj naredil napako. Ko kaj doseže, pa ga to ne navda s samovšečnostjo. In ker je tak, se mu ne tresejo hlače, ko se vzpenja na visoke in strme vrhove. Ko gre čez vodo, se ne premoči. In v ognju mu ni prevroče. In prav zato, ker je tak, se lahko povzpne v praznino *daota*. (ibid.)

Resnični človek se nikoli pretirano ne radosti življenja, niti ga ni strah smrti. Prihaja in odhaja brez pompa in drame. Nikoli ne pozabi na to, od kod izvira, a se prav tako nikoli ne sprašuje po tem, kam ga bo ponesla prihodnost in kašen bo njegov konec:

是之謂不以心捐道，不以人助天。是之謂真人。若然者，其心志，其容寂，其顙顙，淒然似秋，煖然似春，喜怒通四時，與物有宜，而莫知其極。

In ker je tak, se razlikuje od večine ljudi, ki v sebi čutijo potrebo po tem, da se upirajo krogotoku *daota*. In tudi tistim ni enak, ki želijo rešiti naravo in pomagati nebu. Kot tak tiho sledi volji svoje srčne zavesti. Njegovo obličje je vselej samotno. Hladen je kot jesen in topel kot pomlad. Njegova radost in žalost se kažeta v menjavi štirih letnih časov. Vedno stori to, kar je primerno glede na zunanje stvari, ki ga obdajajo, ne da bi mu bilo mar za to, kje se bo vse skupaj končalo. (ibid.)

Resnični človek se razlikuje od konfucijanske modrinje ali modreca, ki vodi pravične vojne in si prizadeva, da ob tem ne bi izgubil naklonjenosti svojih podanikov. Tak modrec ali modrinja je nenehno obremenjen s svojo željo pomagati ljudem in naravi okrog sebe. Zhuangzi nam svetuje, naj se ne navežemo na ljudi⁷ in naj ne poskušamo deliti svojih radosti z drugimi. Resnična (so) človečnost je zanj nekaj popolnoma drugega kot razkazovanje čustev topline in ljubezni do svojih soljudi. Korist in škoda sta zanj zgolj dve plati ene in iste medalje.

7 Ta navezanost na ljudi je v bistvu seveda navezanost na lastni jaz. Šele notranja bližina smrti in misel nanjo je tisto, ki nam pomaga, da se rešimo tovrstne škodljive navezanosti in se lažje prepustimo krogotoku časa, prostora in *daota* (gl. Ott 2019, 330).

行名失己，非士也；亡身不真，非役人也。

Kdor se briga zgolj za lastno slavo, izgubi samega sebe. Resnični učenjaki niso taki. Kdor pozabi na svojo lastno osebnost, nikakor ni resnični človek, ki bi lahko pomagal drugim. (ibid.)

Človek, ki je v središču bivanja, je za daoistke in daoiste torej resnični človek. To je človek, ki se prav zaradi te svoje središčne pozicije nahaja na točki nekakšne neranljivosti, ki jo doseže s tem, ko ostaja zvest samemu sebi. Šele ko izpolniš samega sebe, lahko namreč zaživiš med soljudmi kot »koristen« član skupnosti.

Etika preseganja ločnic med živimi bitji

Osrednja razlika, ki razmejuje različne teorije vrlinske etike, pa se kaže v kontekstu vprašanja o tem, kaj pravzaprav šteje kot vrlina oziroma krepost. V tem pogledu sta najvplivnejša dva diskurza. Prvi je eudemonističen in izhaja iz aristotelske tradicije, drugi pa intuicionističen in ga lahko zasledujemo vse do empirista Davida Huma. Prvi diskurz razlaga vrlino kot značajsko potezo, ki doprinaša k pozitivnemu razvoju in blagostanju človeštva, drugi pa kot nekaj, kar je vredno občudovanja in zato tudi posnemanja. Teorije prvega so zakoreninjene v ideji človeške narave, ki pa je v *Zhuangziju* (tako kot v večini drugih klasičnih kitajskih filozofskih diskurzov) odsotna. Zato večina teoretikov in teoretičark, ki delujejo na področju kitajske etike, Zhuangzijevo etiko vrlin prišteva med diskurze intuicionistične etike. Številni raziskovalci in raziskovalke so mnjenja, da gre pri tem za »konkretno etiko« (Fox 2002, 82), tj. obliko vrlinske etike, ki je tesno povezana z vrlinsko epistemologijo: v tem okviru je resnica tisto, kar vé resnični človek, medtem ko je dobro tisto, kar naredi dober človek (Huang 2010, 1052).

Zhuangzijevo vrlinska etika je torej etika raznolikosti in pluralnosti, etika, ki presega hipokrizijo strpnosti. Kot številni med vami, ki poznajo *Zhuangzija*, že vedo, je avtor v svoji zgodbi o morski ptici poudaril pomen zavedanja dejstva, da vsi živimo v različnih svetovih oziroma da vsak od nas živi v svojem lastnem, posebnem svetu. Zato ne moremo uporabljati istih meril za vsa živa bitja in zato o drugih nikoli ne moremo soditi na osnovi kriterijev, ki veljajo v našem lastnem, ozko zamejenem svetu. V *Zhuangziju* beremo:

魚出水而生，人出水而死。彼必相與異，其好惡故異也。故先聖不一其能，不同其事。名止於實，義設於適，是之為條達而福持。

Riba lahko živi samo v vodi, človek pa v njej umre. Ker imata torej oba (riba in človek) različne lastnosti, je različno tudi tisto, kar ljubita ali

sovražita. Zato davni modreci posameznih sposobnosti in obnašanja niso merili z enotnimi kriteriji. Ime se ustavi pred stvarnostjo. Pomen se oblikuje v ustreznosti. (Zhuangzi s. d., Waipian, Zhi le, 5)

Druga pomembna značilnost Zhuangzijeve vrlinske etike se kaže v nekaterih bistvenih razlikah, ki jo ločujejo od konfucijanske deontologije. Tako je, kot smo videli, za konfucijance in konfucijanke osnova (so)človečnosti (*ren*) v družinskem spoštovanju oziroma otroški ljubezni do staršev. Zhuangzi pa po drugi strani poudarja, da najvišja (so)človečnost nikakor ni povezana s to krepostjo:

夫至仁尚矣，孝固不足以言之。此非過孝之言也，不及孝之言也。[...] 以敬孝易，以愛孝難；以愛孝易，以忘親難；忘親易，使親忘我難；使親忘我易，兼忘天下難；兼忘天下易，使天下兼忘我難。

Najvišja (so)človečnost je tako veličastna, da se je ne da opisati z otroško pieteto. [...] Lahko je spoštovati starše, če jih častimo, a težko, če jih ljubimo. Lahko je spoštovati starše, če jih ljubimo, a težko, če jih pozabimo. Lahko je pozabiti starše, a težko doseči, da oni pozabijo nate. Lahko je doseči, da te starši pozabijo, a težko je pozabiti ves svet. Lahko je pozabiti ves svet, a težko doseči, da ves svet pozabi tebe. (Zhuangzi s. d., Tian yun, 2)

Ko Zhuangzi tukaj govori o najvišji (so)človečnosti, ki jo lahko dosežemo samo brez družinskega spoštovanja oziroma otroške pietete, to seveda nika- kor ne pomeni, da bi bili starši ovira pri tem, da izkusimo oziroma dosežemo to pomembno krepost (Huang 2010, 1065). Pomeni zgolj, da jih moramo v ta namen pozabiti. Seveda je mnogo težje starše pozabiti, kot pa jih imeti rada, kajti dokler jih ne pozabiš, seveda veš, da jih moraš imeti rada, zato se na vsak način potrudíš, da sebi in njim pokažeš ta čustva, ki jih do njih gojiš. Pozabiti starše torej nikakor ne pomeni, da jih nujno nimaš rada; prav nasprotno, to po- meni zgolj, da jih lahko imaš rada brez vsakršnega truda. Kadar jih imaš rada tako, da nanje pozabiš, jih imaš rada naravno, spontano in brez napora. Zato se je po Zhuangziju lažje potruditi za to, da jih imaš rada, kot pa jih imeti rada brez napora. Četudi se to (kot marsikateri drugi del *Zhuangzija*) na prvi pogled zdi paradoksalno, pa gre pri tem v bistvu za precej globoko sporočilo: resnični ljudje lahko moralno delujejo brez napora, a brez velikega napora človek težko postane resnični človek (ibid.).

V tem najdemo tudi drugo pomembno razliko, ki ločuje daoistično etiko od kon- fucijanske: ideal prve je resnični človek (*zhen ren*), ideal zadnje pa modrec (*sheng*

ren).⁸ Medtem ko si je konfucijanski modrec ali modrinja vselej svesta svojih moralnih dolžnosti, obveznosti in odgovornosti, druga vselej deluje moralno, ne da bi se tega sploh zavedala, saj je dobrota esencialni del njene vseobsežne in vseprevevajoče spontanosti, naravnosti in pristnosti, ki se kaže v njeni povezanosti z naravo in kozmosom. Resnični človek je integralna osebnost in je moralen ravno zaradi tega, ker je »tak, kot je« (*ziran*)⁹. Iz istega razloga lahko trdimo tudi, da predstavlja njegova etika posebno (in nadvse zanimivo ter pomenljivo) vrsto etike vrlin.

Zhuangzijeve etika je etika vrlin: ne zgolj zaradi tega, ker nas spodbuja, da pripomoremo k temu, da bo vse »tako, kot je« (*ziran*), temveč tudi zaradi tega, ker nam nudi možnost, da ob tem sami postanemo tisti človek, ki čuti, da je sam »tak, kot je« (*ziran*) v tem, ko pomaga drugim, da postanejo »taki, kot so« (Huang 2010, 1067).

To je način delovanja, v katerem človek doseže to, čemur Zhuangzi pravi »zliti se z naravo skozi naravo« (*yi tian he tian*) (gl. Zhuangzi s. d., Waipian, Da sheng, 11). Takšno delovanje je nujno moralno prav zaradi tega, ker je onkraj dobrega in zla, ki se lahko kaže zgolj v sodbah o tem, kaj je eno in kaj drugo.

Ljudje, ki smo determinirani z omejitvami svojih spoznavnih aparatov, pač težimo k temu, da priznavamo resničnost tistim vrstam spoznanja, ki se prilegajo našim vrednostnim sistemom:

與己同則應，不與己同則反，同於己為是之，異於己為非之。

Strinjamo se s tistimi, ki imajo isto mnenje kot mi, in nasprotujemo tistim, katerih mnenja so različna od našega. Mnenje, ki je enako našemu, imamo za resnico, mnenja, ki se od našega razlikujejo, pa za zmoto. (Zhuangzi s. d., Zapian, Yu yan, 1)

Zlasti subjektivnost ljudi je torej tista, ki odloča o tem, kaj je (resnično, splošno veljavno) znanje in kaj ne. Objektivnost in neodvisnost ljudi se vselej znova izkaže kot zgolj navidezna, kot utvara, s katero zavajamo sami sebe. Kakovost, lastnosti, vrsta ter obseg našega zaznavanja in dojemanja stvarnosti – vse to je vselej pogojeno s konkretnimi pogoji naših življenj. V našem dojetju – in s tem v našem vedenju, in v naših reakcijah na svet, ki nas obkroža, smo torej vse odvisne od zunanjih dejavnikov, ki pa se konec koncev vselej izkažejo kot vrsta odvisnosti od samih sebe. Ta odvisnost in determinacija sta seveda povezani z našim neznanjem, z našo nezmožnostjo spoznavanja oziroma prepoznavanja bistva nas samih in našega okolja.

8 Za odlično, poglobljeno in dobro utemeljeno analizo teh razlik gl. Moeller in D'Ambrosio (2017).

9 V sodobni kitajščini pomeni izraz *ziran* fizična oziroma zunanja narava.

Zhuangzijev resnični človek, tj. človek, ki tiči v vsakem od nas, presega tudi to razmejitev, torej ločnico med seboj samim in svojim okoljem. Zaradi tega prepozna tudi bistvo, ki je, kot bi rekel Antoine de Saint-Exupery, očem nevidno.

Resnični človek nam tako pokaže tudi, zakaj smo ljudje tako izjemna in posebna bitja: veličina človeka se kaže ravno v naši zmožnosti pozabe dejstva, da smo ljudje, pa tudi v naši sposobnosti zlitja z vsem obstoječim. Tako lahko imamo človeško podobo brez človeških čustev, zlasti tistih, ki se izražajo v naši navezanosti na partikularnosti, na izolirane entitete, ločene od enote bivanja in izvzete iz pristnosti življenja. Zato nas Zhuangzi uči, na kakšen način lahko svojo človeškost izpraznimo ne zgolj lažnih poželenj in iluzornih navezanosti, temveč tudi vseh fiksnih in okorelih normativnosti. To lahko po Zhuangziju dosežemo s pomočjo metode »postenja srčne zavesti« (*xin zhai*), s katero dosežemo »pozabo svojega jaza« (*wang wo*). Kljub temu (oziroma ravno zaradi tega) ostane Zhuangzi humanist: pozaba jaza ga namreč ne privede do zapustitve konkretnega sveta in vsega bivajočega. Zhuangzi nikoli ne pobegne v neko mistično poenotenje s transcendentnim nebom (Perkins 2015, 200). Prav nasprotno: ravno ozaveščanje narave in naše lastne umeščenosti vanjo nam znotraj naše individualne eksistence in znotraj našega partikularnega, subjektivnega izkustva nudi osrednjo točko, ki nam omogoča pristnejše videnje konkretnega sveta okoli sebe in dinamično, situacijsko delovanje, ki temelji na nedelovanju, torej na odsotnosti vsakršnih nasilnih posegov v krogotok pranačela *daota*. In konec koncev nam ravno ta fleksibilnost omogoča, da resnično dojamemo pozitivni pomen narave in sveta, skupaj z nami samimi ter z našimi soljudmi in vsemi drugimi sobitji. Šele na tej osnovi lahko ves ta svet sprejmemo vase in ga počlovečimo ne zgolj kot neko abstraktno enoto vseh stvari, temveč kot posamičnost in večnost vsakega trenutka, ki ga živimo.

Zaključek

Zato v *Zhuangziju* začutimo svobodo, ki je morda dejansko specifično in enkratno človeška, a hkrati daleč od tega, da bi nam nalagala breme kakršne koli fiksne in normativne etike (ibid.). Tukaj ni statičnih imperativov, temelječih na domnevno povsod in vselej veljavnem znanju ali na kakršnih koli »univerzalnih vrednotah«. To je svoboda, ki nam ne nudi zgolj uvida in razumevanja naše lastne nepomembnosti znotraj širine sveta, v katerega smo umeščeni, temveč nam omogoča tudi, da to nepomembnost sprejmemo. Zhuangzi nam sugerira nekaj, kar je morda nekoliko ironično, a vendarle vredno razmisleka: verjetno smo ljudje tako izredna in enkratna bitja ravno zaradi tega, ker smo kljub zavedanju svoje smrtnosti zmožni spoznati in sprejeti svoj položaj zgolj ene od mnogih vrst živih bitij, ki

naseljujejo naš planet. Takšno zavedanje, ki smo ga v tem prispevku poimenovali z izrazom ekološki humanizem, je po Zhuangziju bistveni del naše človeškosti.

Človek ne bo nikoli rešil planeta (saj naša zemlja človeka in njegove »pomoči« niti najmanj ne potrebuje). Morda pa bo vendarle lahko ponotranjil takšno vrsto človeškosti, kot jo zagovarja Zhuangzi, in s tem vendarle še rešil vsaj samega sebe in svojo veličastno, unikatno in oh, tako zelo kratkovidno vrsto.

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OTHER TOPICS

Reimagining Affection in a Changing Shanghai: A Rhizomatic Young Cartography of Birdhead's Contemporary Photography

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Abstract

The article examines the dynamics of space surrounding Shanghai's rampant urban change as experienced by the Chinese artistic duo known as Birdhead. Underpinned by the conceptual framework of the "affective turn", this study reflects upon and addresses how the photographer's chaotic photo-essay of Shanghai's new state housing (*Xincun*, New Village, 2008) can function as a nexus of place-making. With a claim to impetuous emotion in his works, Birdhead's contemporary photography pervades a plane of subjects, objects, and affections, in which the city is imagined and experienced as space-body performativity. Understanding Birdhead's everyday urban practices as performative, we claim that the visual performance of these photographs not just materially shapes the bodies, but also acts as a rhizomatic catalyst for both things-in-themselves and webs of social affection inside and outside Shanghai. As a contribution, this article's theoretical application to Birdhead's everyday networks of unruly and frenzied emotional tactics challenges the official formulation of realism. More importantly, their contemporary photography apprehends and territorializes elements of anarchy, at the very same time deterritorializing the omnipresent affective strategies of a propagandistic post-socialist apparatus that pressures the positive over "other" emotional representations of Shanghai.

Keywords: Chinese contemporaneity, affective turn, new materialism, a rhizomatic sense of place, young "minor" bodies, performativity

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Preoblikovanje podob naklonjenosti v spreminjajočem se Šanghaju: rizomatična mlada kartografija Birdheadove sodobne fotografije

Izvleček

Članek preučuje dinamiko prostora neobvladljivih urbanih sprememb v Šanghaju, kot jih doživlja kitajski umetniški duo, znan kot Birdhead. Študija, ki temelji na konceptualnem ogrodju »afektivnega obrata«, obravnava, kako fotografov kaotični fotoesej novih državnih nastanitev v Šanghaju (*Xincun*, Nova vas, 2008) deluje kot povezava pri ustvarjanju kraja. Birdheadova sodobna fotografija s poudarkom na silovitih čustvih prežema ravnino subjektov, objektov in čustev, v katerih je mesto zamišljeno ter doživeto kot prostorsko-telesna performativnost. Razumevajoč Birdheadove vsakdanje urbane prakse kot performativne, trdimo, da vizualna uprizoritev teh fotografij ne oblikuje telesa zgolj materialno, temveč deluje kot rizomatičen katalizator tako za stvari v sebi kot za mreže družbene naklonjenosti znotraj in zunaj Šanghaja. Teoretska aplikacija tega članka v odnosu do Birdheadovih vsakdanjih mrež podivjanih in neukrotljivih emocionalnih taktik postavlja pod vprašaj uradno formulacijo realizma. Še pomembneje je, da njuna sodobna fotografija obsega in teritorializira element anarhije, istočasno pa deteritorializira vseprisotne afektivne strategije propagandnega postsocialističnega aparata, ki poudarja pozitivno nad »drugimi« čustvenimi reprezentacijami Šanghaja.

Ključne besede: kitajska sodobnost, afektivni obrat, novi materializem, rizomatičen občutek prostora, mlada »manjša« telesa, performativnost

Introduction

China's Urban Rhizomatic Spaces and the Visual Arts

In the last few decades, since China's economic reforms started to take shape, urbanization has provoked a ceaseless transformation in the design of cities. This post-socialist, fast-paced gentrification of layers of urban history has caused entire old neighbourhoods to be razed on a grand scale. The possible development of a consumer society in transition was both a painful and vibrant powerful eruption of the extensive, glimmering physical networks integrated into Shanghai's detritus-built environment (Wu and Phillips 2004). Ever since, debates about demolition and relocation have brought together experts and scholars in the field of built heritage to discuss the spatial and aesthetic effects on the visual arts (Braester 2010; Visser 2010; Wang and Valjakka 2015; Ortells-Nicolau 2017). Physical and economic prosperity has left behind China's soviet model in the wake of the socialist era so much associated with a "controlled urbanization" (1949–1978), which privileged the development of the countryside over the city (Murphey 1980). In contrast with this anti-urban proposition, there is another more realistic variant that sketched an urban-biased approach in its policies of

urban development, namely favouring subventions including health care, public housing programs, as well as the introduction of methods for control over rural migration to urban areas (Chan 1989). It is fair to say that Mao's new model of national development and its strategies were both pro-urban and anti-urban. With Deng's "post-reform" era, the economic expansion provoked a greater concentration of wealth in cities, and there was the diversification of the market economy and an urban scaling in both small and larger cities. A "floating population" of migrant workers started to be observed in the main cities across China, whilst there was urbanization of the rural areas to maintain a balance between small, medium-sized and the largest cities (Ginsburg 1993). These urban policies created differences in urban growth between coastal and non-coastal cities, as well as challenges in metropolitan areas like Shanghai, to preserve the size of the population and create a sustainable urban agglomeration (*ibid.*, 1993). Consequently, the representation of this Chinese urbanization model has not just been reproduced in mass cultural forms, but the avant-garde has also made a genuine attempt to re-define urban culture into alternative terms. There have been attempts by contemporary artists who use photography and their bodies—such as Zhang Dali, Dai Guangyu and Jin Feng—to allocate unconventional affections that deal not just with the utopian narratives of Chinese cityscapes that stress the sight of the city as a place of representation, but also with those who are below this sanctioned distribution of sensory urbanism,¹ to expand such representations to other senses (Marinelli 2015).

This article focuses on the collaboration of two young Shanghainese artists, under the pseudonym Birdhead (a well-established collective formed by Ji Weiyu, born in Shanghai in 1979, and Song Tao, born in the same city a year later), who have been continually contributing as visual cartographers to the rapid changes the city has been undergoing. Ji and Song's (Ji and Song, 2008) photographic book explores the hasty urban transformation of the ever-expanding metropolis during the Shanghai World Expo 2010 (Lu 2012). Building on theories of contemporaneity through affect, this paper claims that Birdhead's visual emphasis on *Xincun*, as an alleged pro-Mao thinking model, produces an effective form of place-making for both a "cool" image of Shanghai's municipal government as well as for promoting the local artistic communities of the city. Their images enact a revolution of the senses in a transitional place that establishes a series of idealized products of the imagination of the middle-class neo-bohemian condition. We argue that their visual lyric devices include a narration of bodies and affects, drawing upon emotional cartography, in which Birdhead and their friends

1 *Sensory urbanism* is here understood as a response against ways of thinking about planning and representing cities that are too reliant on our sense of vision.

are the characters who disclose the perceptions, memories and cultural emotions embedded in their bodily performances. Such a body-spatial subjective approach includes the affective dimension of the language of photography as performance art. It also includes the generational conflicts between post-1980s young artists and their previous parental artistic and humanistic know-how. And finally, their interior landscapes are emotional trajectories that are linked to the material reality of their *Xincun*'s quotidian cosmos, adding a peculiar sense of place.

This article aims to contribute to the theoretical framework of historical materialism and realism in the visual arts of Shanghai's rapid transformation by exploring the *Xincun* as a backbone to understand the shift from a socialist to a post-socialist city. A second striking feature of Birdhead is their careful photographic treatment of the neo-bohemian (older city areas continue to innovate culturally, yet these bohemian traditions cross over with the growth of the economy). We argue that Birdhead's poetic style has fed the fantasy of young urbanites, as power is also affective in China. This is especially true in a country where negative feelings and emotions can turn into a positive state propaganda apparatus (Yen 2005). The mixture of feelings trickles down into the everyday lives of young people who, like Birdhead, can transform it too into their own forms of affections.

The production of affective photographic urban landscapes can be a method to visualize a documented cultural lifestyle of a changing Shanghai. The concept of the rhizome is proposed to explore Birdhead's living visual approaches to produce alternative spaces and subjectivities of the city. Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980]) define a rhizome as a non-hierarchical and heterogeneous structure, a rearrangement of states within the realms of life and art that can function using extension and enlargement. Birdhead's photography resounds with Zhang's rewriting of the "other" narrative voices of Shanghai that "undo" and "redo": subconscious societal notions that are competing for Chinese subjectivities of the city and China, which "also shows the ruthless movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, by which different ideological systems seeks its own afterlife at other's expenses" (Zhang 2002, 31). On the one hand, we acknowledge the Deleuzian notion of subjectivity, and apply it to Birdhead's photography as a cartography of differences between subjects and objects. In other words, subjectivity is not comprehended as an identity, but as a mechanism of subversion of existing power structures in order to institute new ways of experiencing corporality in social and community life. On the other hand, their creative *rhizome* is capable to connect with the emotional spaces of the *Xincun* as well as making connections elsewhere.

This study thus contributes to the literature on visual arts and the Chinese sense of place by enunciating and demonstrating performative photography as a specific type of creative placemaking process, which gives prominence to the expression of affection. The conceptualization of the article also puts emphasis on Deleuzian approaches to mapping a sense of place in the post-socialist city. This paper begins with a contextual description of Chinese performative photography based on the relevant literature, followed by a brief exploration of art theories on contemporaneity and a discussion on the ontological role of analogue photography in Birdhead's digital age. The succeeding section introduces the conceptual framework of affection as a "bodily emotional cartography" and offers an outline of the methods used for data collection and analysis. The article then presents the assemblage patterns of the exemplary case of *Xincun*, articulating the process and interwoven relationship of affection construction and Birdhead's everyday sense of place. Finally, the article concludes with the proposal of affection as a bodily emotional cartography in which a non-essentialist creative place-making development is formed by affects, bodies, and objects to see through what has been separated between the material and non-material of post-socialist Shanghai.

Context: Performative Photography in China

Birdhead map the geographies of the new villages that were created in the post-1950s Mao era, due to population growth and rural migration to the city. This pioneering model was predominantly inaugurated in *Caoyang* New Village in Shanghai's *Putuo* District, which at the time was situated in the immediate surroundings of the megalopolis. Mao's anti-bourgeoisie place-making strategic development stretched out the urban sprawl into rural areas, producing urban-rural socialist settlements in the city (Visser 2010). These new villages were the first archetype of a socialist community, and were motivated by the need to make available housing for the industrial workers and their families: to satisfy their everyday needs, which implied addressing the housing question in response to new standards of comfort in terms of services and hygiene. The revolutionary thought apparent here was then extended, and work and home units were originally built to mobilize grass-root initiatives, which were supervised by the central state as spaces of socialist modernity. They moulded the vicious and colonial structural landscapes, to exude a soviet experience as opposed to one of class struggle (Lu 2012). In practice, these "apparent" bottom-down policies and programs were to empower the people in these project sites, and were to improve the lives of workers and their families.

Since the end of the 1970s, the main pioneers of performance art and groups like those in the *Stars Group* (*Xing Xing Pai*), filmed and documented their fluid outburst of practices as cultural and social breeding grounds to address concerns related to place (Wang 2016). There was a flood of enthusiasm for knowing and discussing a wide variety of art and literary production in the 1980s that led to self-organized avant-garde circles in different geographical locations across the country during the heydays of the cultural fever (Wang 1998). However, a genuine conversation between civil society and the established order was always associated with official reluctance (Zhang 2002). As argued by Berghuis (2008), the prevalence of performances during the 1990s set up regeneration and a real dialogue with the external world, despite the strict state censorship system. With the impossibility of confronting concrete problems and having real dialogues with the central government, subjectivity becomes a fundamental channel for artists to create an “other” sense of place. This invisible spatiality coexists with other past and contemporary temporalities of post-socialist China, being typified in Birdhead’s sensorial construction of place.

The creativity of the city and the arts in photography took an alternative route as a response to top-down post-socialist urbanism (Zheng 2010). Along with this spatial turn, the art critic Zheng (2010) established himself on the foundations for a reorientation of socio-spatial relations to pinpoint the burden of documenting the cartography of motion and life. Zheng (2010) suggests that contemporary artists began to touch on not only the aesthetics and ethics of the process of gentrification, but they often dropped such theoretical concepts as the avant-garde within a variety of leitmotifs and experimental methods to re-appropriate the city in the face of unceasing transmutations on the phenomenon of urbanization. Ortells-Nicolau (2015) has also studied the works of Chinese artists in the 1980s and onwards, and claims that the ruins of the city’s countless demolition sites were in the background of the documented performances of the new village. That is to say, photography served as a self-portrait tool and a medium to record these historical changes and bodily artistic innovations in the country (Zhu and Iturrioz 2007). In view of that, there are two cities, the “real” representational city of the architects and urban planners, as scrutinized by the Chinese government, who according to Zukin (1991) endorse the most important role in any socio-cultural process of urban transformation; and that of the artists, such as those identified in Birdhead’s visual endeavours; who can challenge the materialist view of the city “as both objects of desire and structural forms, [whose] work bridges time and space” (Zukin 1991, 39). Therefore, these images also expose how totalizing discourses of the city are responsible for defining and delimiting what it means to become young as a living transit between puberty and adulthood. Birdhead’s young subjectivities divert from the post-socialist

narratives that reinforce the idea that everything must be guided (including how to be young). Moreover, this article also demonstrates how their photography multiplies the emotional variations of the young through the effects of post-socialist totalizing discourses of Shanghai's New Village. We look at *Xincun* as an object in its symbolic understanding rather than its socio-political logic, whose playful-aesthetic photography can make the image of subjective youth enlarge the diversity of the young artistic existences of Shanghai.

Non-Representational Spaces of Contemporaneity

As examined in recent Chinese art history, the works of Chinese artists have been re-enacting new forms of psychological emancipation when interacting with urban development. Wu (2008) states that when observing some key features of contemporaneous artists intervening in Chinese cities, they have internalized the accelerated urban ruins prevalent in the 1990s because of gentrification. The precarious lives of the youngsters of Beijing New Village (also known as East Village), whose first performances and installations with their own naked bodies were recorded in new media artefacts. Their role in disseminating public awareness deconstructed the symbols of the past and disjointed to turn them into “an untotalling totality” with a new avant-garde language (Jie 2006, 323). These young creators were appropriating the Western performative style with related visual devices to demonstrate an attitude or a certain cultural behaviour between art and life (Gao 2005). Body art, which was also termed “in action art” by Berghuis (2008), also reflected Chinese artistic outlooks regarding their individual-collective cohabitation and their ever-increasing desire for artistic expression, as an act of community closeness in Beijing New Village.

A prominent example of this intersection of media is the photographer Rong Rong, who is famous for his romantic performances around dilapidated buildings posing in a wedding dress with Inri, his wife. Rong Rong's photographs give the impression of romanticism, which is thrilling in its ambiguous fusion of the Western and Chinese aesthetic appreciation of ruins that were capturing both the past and the future (Hung 2004). This historicism responds to the existence of a Chinese cultural contemporaneity that nurtures a ritualistic Daoist/Buddhist/Confucianist hierarchy and virtues, which can be considered unitary realities themselves and that indicated a mutual reciprocity in a continuum with Western forms of deconstruction (Gladston 2010).

Ruined cityscapes set up a point of departure for a greater understanding of (a-)historical references of Chinese time that sit between cultural memory and

introspective forms of being in time (Hung 2003). Facing the astounding consequences of Chinese urbanization, Gao (2008) acknowledges the notion of Chinese contemporaneity as witnessing the spatial and geopolitical reality of matter rather than just being a new epoch, or a suggestive form of “being in Chinese time”:

Thus, Chinese modernity seems to be absolutely given by a premediated consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national, cultural, and political territorial boundary. (Gao 2008, 134)

Rong Rong was also photographing the artist Zhang Huan in *Twelve Square Meters* (2007), with the latter locked up for an hour in a public toilet in the East Village. Zhang Huan’s body was smeared with fish oil and honey, creating a stench that attracted large numbers of flies and other insects that stuck to his body. That performance was not just a direct criticism of the lack of hygiene in public toilets in urban and rural areas, but also alluded to the poet Ai Qing, father of the well-known artist Ai Weiwei, who during the Cultural Revolution was sent to work in the remote Xinjiang province, where he was forced to toil in the public latrines (Querol 2012). This experimentation, with not just photography but also other media including documenting performances in urban settings, took place in the 1990s and encompassed collective and individual memories, along with historical connections between the self and nation that inspire observers to have a conversation between the past and present. At the same time the artists could reflect on the urban precariousness of Chinese cities, while their diverse heterogeneous artistic interventions—including happenings, paintings, music, theatrical performances, and documenting parties—strengthened an important communal bond in the Beijing New Village (Hung 2003). Sheldon (2007), drawing from Foucault’s biopower forms of subjugation over large segments of the population, argues how artists’ bodies personify the state’s over-regulation as a means of reconstructing control, which is efficiently carried out as a way of disciplining Chinese society.

This article builds on the awareness that the reciprocal complexities between post-socialist visual culture and urban spaces, “considering that performance played a major role in Chinese art in the 1980s and 1990s”, are a crucial component of Birdhead’s pan-media (multiple forms of media including the body) that embodies forms of dissemination (Cotton 2009, 24). After the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the more immediate contemporaneity of these performative photographers was to elicit the loss of traditional values and the growth of postmodern attitudes, by ascribing a new social role to artists, who became the focus of attention in the West (Wu and Phillips 2004). Many activist artists

in Beijing New Village were also complaining about the lack of preservation policies and were supportive of the recovery of the buildings of old Beijing, giving special attention to the preservation of the historic district with the famous *hutong* alleys (Braester 2010). Despite the apparent bohemian collective attitude of these artists in the New Village, they were all looking for individual fame and financial support, since these were lacking from both Chinese and international institutions. The new Post-New Era (*hou xin shiqi*), with the arrival of art festivals for body artworks, provided a route to the world of contemporary art institutions with its cynical aesthetics of irony and trauma. Daoist practices to express the free will of the artists together with autonomous, self-indulgent and violent performances were the necessary responses to a still dark and suffocating post-reform era (Berghuis 2008). At the same time, from the 1990s on two art styles were showcasing the ideological pessimism and economic potential of the era: “cynical realism (*wanshi xianshi zhuyi*) and political pop (*zhengzhi bopu*), acquired predominance in contemporary art, articulating the idioms of pop art with an ironic and blasé critical stance” (Ortells-Nicolau 2017, 169). Contemporary art triggered the political and creative dynamics of the Western art system, which was less experimental than the 1985 new wave movements that were more in tune with Bourriaud’s (2008) relational aesthetics of embracing the “whole of human relations and their social context” (ibid. 118–119).² These factors contributed to the emergence of a critical mood in the 2000s, which eroded the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with works such as Zhang Dali’s uncanny skull on shattered walls. These works drew attention to mass media outlets making visible the Chinese officials’ obsession with transforming the city with the spreading of houses and shopping centres and moving people around under urban encroachment (Woodworth 2015). At the same time, Zhang’s bodily art street praxis also embodies the excessive never-ending urban transformations of Chinese cities that cannot exist without traces of the past:

Zhang ponders the temporalities of urban imagery: the striking disconnection between psychological perception and experiential data leads him to compare living in Beijing today, in its complexity, to ‘living in a start of trance, since it [feels] more like one thousand years have gone by’. (Marinelli 2015, 7)

Building on this reflection on place-making in the city, Braester (2010) makes clear that this spatial practice is the result of a history that has been manifesting

2 In addition to his work as a curator and art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud (born 1965) is also an author and lecturer in the field of contemporary art.

the broad context of interaction between both political and economic policies, as opposed to everyday practices of representing the city and between the PRC's urban leadership and the arts and cinema, in a headlong rush to urban-sprawl. Indeed, there is an endless interchange of macro (molar) and micro (molecular) contours that mirrors a social space itself in a personal, collective and historical sense (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). We claim that Birdhead's embodied affectivity navigates across changing sensations between opacity and transparency through a network of photographic moments that move beyond Chinese rigid subjectivities of visual culture.

Birdhead's Performative Photography in the Digital Era

Birdhead's snippets of life manifest how their analogue photography has privileged and anticipated the importance of the medium in a post-photographic society to visualize the invisibility that exists between objects and subjects in action. The resistance of Birdhead to the use of digital technology, despite the virtual hegemony of today's new media culture, is evident in the slow process of their casual photography, which still venerates the darkroom to the detriment of an uncertain scenario: the so-called post-photographic trend. This technological turn brings together traditional and electronic devices and is postulated by Fontcuberta as something that "does not mark a new technique in the digital age but rethinks the image in its totality" (cited in Moreiras 2017, 2). Digital photography is unravelling how the medium has ceased to be a channel of communication to become a living environment, where the owner of the image and the artist's talented material trademark imply new dilemmas of authorship. In this convergence culture, users and consumers are members of an active ecosystem, where they all have a role in producing and appropriating images (Jenkins 2006). The role of contemporary photography and its authorial shamanistic powers of the original creation—with Baudelaire as the maximum advocate, to the death of the author as announced by Barthes and Foucault—needs to be readdressed in the current network society. These contradictions allow us to revisit the figure of the dandy, whose individuality and lack of social convention can model the artist as if he or she were their own work of art. The modernist and materialist culture of Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s was a stage for the trope of the dandy, which became a male image that was designed for the female imagination (Lee 1999). As will be discussed later, Birdhead can also be categorized under the conception of the dandy, as a form of subjectivity that is comfortable with decadence "identified with the (bourgeoisie/anti-bourgeoisie) insubordination", and being looked at (Hewitt 1993, 89). Reality is an artifice that one creates with one's own

character-defining deeds; in other words, the supreme conduct of one's own life in a Baudelairean aesthetic ideal. Birdhead's collective authorship is interesting to analyse, since their leaning towards the physicality of cultural artifacts points to a contradictory duality that is situated in the mid-point between the authorial modernism of Baudelaire and the postmodern death of the author. Nevertheless, subjectivity is decentred in the midst of a set of snapshots that outline a Shanghai in the midst of fleeting moments, in which Birdhead play with the representational space, and the functional architecture of the city, whilst also infiltrating a line of flight with their bodies of displacement, which are no longer formal or habitual. Indeed, Birdhead's assemblage performs privilege with the notion of affections as the aesthetics of young artists whose individual imprints permeate into the wider socio-political structure and audiences' consciousness to connect the two in a non-essentialist manner. It is suggested that their non-alienating *detournement*, and "constructed emotions" are proposed as techniques to construct their sense of place.

Theoretical Framework

Affection as a "Bodily Emotional Cartography"

This article provides some reflections on photography and the order of emotions, in which feelings can produce senses capable of transforming the motivating effects of "other" actions that are invisible from the Chinese public sphere (Hizi 2021). There is a synergy between Birdhead's intimate actions and their network of artistic and everyday scenarios of their *Xincun*, which produce a creative collective of intersubjectivities within and without the habits of their everyday life. The claim being made is that their emotional ecosystem is important to offer an extra layer within a Chinese sensibility that does not reward anything related to politics in the arts, but the homogeneity of socio-cultural norms that naturalize the national mindset. A further assertion being made is that Birdhead's transformative subjectivities represent the logic of urban youth, who seem to be either angry or are just powerless realists who are only pursuing fun. These affections are argued as pushing the boundaries of a sensibility in which youth subjectivities are subjected to "an ongoing process of meaning-making based on the negotiation between individual agency and the conditions in which this agency can be enacted" (Fu 2021, 428). Their affective photography subtly goes against the rationalism of the city, since Birdhead's representations of Shanghai are backed by a deep-rooted antagonistic perception of its "natural" cosmovision.

This brings the analysis to the Western “affective turn” in the 1990s, which explored the metaphysical and epistemological role that emotions autonomously play out with respect to language and textual discourse (Ahmed 2004). Clough (2008) identifies this “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences within Anglo-Saxon academia, with the question of corporality, defined by two significant articles from 1995: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold”, and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect”. At the same time, another significant body of work comes from the multidisciplinary book *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), which is an anthology of some of the most renowned authors who acknowledge the processual character of emotions across material objects and subjects (Seigworth and Gregg 2012). These authors claim that the corporeal has the capacity or the will of action to affect and be affected by external objects. Thus, it is in the capacity of the body that affect can be understood as a graduated palette that draws the texture of the afflicted bodies. From these premises, it can be deduced that bodies can also be on the move, and emotions exist to mobilize them. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, it is also stated that affection is not an expression of inferiority or subjectivity, but that it is something that happens in between, stemming from both the psychologist conceptions derived from an individual subject as well as from the sociology of collective emotions in which the individual is trapped. The paper draws on Spinoza’s ethics about the potentiality of the body as the sole blueprint that determines our actions, as an independent substance with consciousness, which can be open to interpretation (Glezos 2017). For that reason, Spinoza postulates that everything is the same substance, including God and nature (Tomkins 2008). Spinoza simply seems to be recognizing the ignorance of the causes that control our actions. Thus, the idea that everything is a performative utterance is rather dubious, as well as the idea that all our dispositions come from an artistic artifice.

Moreover, the second current of thought that is also pervasive in *The Affect Theory Reader* shows that Deleuzian authors like Massumi (1995) tap into the concept of intensity, which highlights the importance of sciences such as biology and mathematics in capturing the concept of affect. Sedgwick (2003) also acknowledges an embodied corporality as an assembled extension of the naked body. In other words, creativity embraces technological devices that facilitate its mundane development. Thus, any subjective and objectified artistic creation within the digital era arrives at an entirely new dimension, when circulating via the internet, which destabilizes the habitual confrontation between rational cognitive thoughts and any irrational feelings. Indeed, Birdhead’s photography skilfully reformulates the relationship between photography and everyday life without entering into the representational, but by penetrating into the impersonal experimentation

and relational of bodies that are linked to the questioning of a differential and relational living material that breaks down the hierarchies of Chinese biopower between human, animal, organic and non-organic species (Figures 1 and 2). This vitalistic cartography is a compendium of material forces that is very near to but also very remote from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) non-linear causality of matter—and opens out into a new process of “machinic assemblages” of substances that connect organic and non-organic lives alike. Both scholars also presume that the relation between content and form in art comes from the elasticity of the work itself rather than from the intentionality of an artist.

Following the aforementioned perspectives, this article will examine the ways to consider the body's affects of moving and being moved around Birdhead's New Village. Contemporary arts can engulf such a space to envision and feel the new villages differently to how they are officially represented in China. Inscribing a reflection in a critical body of research that deals with contemporary aesthetic practices in China, it will be claimed that Birdhead develops affection in shaping one's feeling for Shanghai as a dynamic threshold of cohesion and disintegration of official bodily forms and sensibilities to understand these places.



Figure 1. View of *Xincun* Village. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiyu (2008)

Methodology

Xincun's Performative and "Affective" Cartography as an Emotional Space

The study employed a distinct case study method to describe the bodily affective approach. The case of *Xincun* serves to highlight the problem of subjectivity and affect with regard to places through some of the photographs chosen, the selection of which came after the interviews with the Birdhead artists Song Tao and Ji Weiyu. The reason for choosing this specific case is because of its non-typicality at the time. The photobook was available in 2008, and it was a ground-breaking effort to study the dynamics of lines of flight that are interrelated and constitute the emotional fabric of these post-revolutionary areas of the city.³ The research methods used in this study include historical documentation, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, in order to analyse an ontology of emotions in Shanghai's affective cartography.

Analysis and Discussion

Birdhead's young performative and subjective post-socialist Xincun

This section opens with the case study and presents the subsequent analysis and discussion of the two young Shanghainese artists who together go by the name Birdhead. The study employed a single case study model to describe the affective and spatial performative approach of Birdhead's contemporary photography. Empowered by performative photography, Birdhead's loose, roaming freedom hovers over the physical and sensorial ecologies that tactically punctuate the suffocating homogenization encountered in the urban-rural fabric of the Caoyang New Villages (also known as *Xincun*). Their photography becomes the place-making process by which their young subjectivity is constituted by as many forces and actors as possible. The features of the social context in which the subjectification process of Chinese young people unfolds is as follows: Party, which manifests in young people's ambivalent attitude toward the CCP and socialist ideology; family, which involves a nexus of long-standing traditional family values and a desire to be independent of family support and control; and the pedagogy of education, which allows limited space for learning citizenship and social participation (Kloet and Fung 2016). Birdhead's post-1980s generation has experienced a booming

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari coined the term "line of flight" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) to describe the elusive moment when change occurs as it was meant to, when a threshold is passed between two paradigms.

economy and increasing material prosperity. They have had access to better education, a more diverse culture and greater information resources than their parents (Yan 2009). These conditions provide them with an expanded range of choices and possibilities for the creation of their subjectivities, extended with merging technologies and better access to information than their previous generations (Liu 2011). The immediate consequences have been a postmodern fragmented subject whose “youthscape pervades a scenario in which youth in China have some room for an agency that offers them an alternative to the same functionalist teleological cultural firewall of China” (de Kloet and Fung 2016 p. 53).

To see how this new subjectivity is structured as part of a creative and artistic process, and to see how Birdhead looks toward the (re)significance interpretation of the old processes and pedagogy paradigms, Weiyu, one of the artists highlights: “we have been trained in art schools, but we are not interested in reading” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Here, we can appreciate their desire to be characters who exist on the fringes of society, in the ways other social outcast protagonists position themselves in films of the sixth generation vis-à-vis mainstream media or the Chinese film industry. Like Birdhead, sixth-generation movies such as *Beijing Bastards* (1993) and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) also appropriated the realist documentary method to portray the generation that was produced during a historical moment when China embraced global capitalism. This new filmmaking impulse began documenting and foregrounding a “bastardization” of the traditional lifestyles of previous generations, and to break away from the mythical grand narratives such aesthetic and ideological permutations drift into, thus creating “confusing experiences of suddenly confronting new psycho-geography and overwhelming urban reality” that gave room for creativity and innovation with regard to old ways of thinking and doing things (Fleming 2014, 519).

Birdhead, like many youngsters and artists of their generation, reveals how this “bastardization” is a form of rebelliousness, one that fluctuates between a spatial plane of remoteness and proximity. Moreover, it is not altogether surprising that their bastardization lines of flight can be regarded as a macho, angry warning used to prove how radical they are in reclaiming their streets. This is echoed by the mixture of empty blockhouses awaiting demolition or ugly Maoist-style apartments foregrounded by Birdhead’s blasé bodies, as a type of creative contradiction (Figure 1). Such incongruity also situates these spaces in post-modern societies, within a Shanghai that accelerates and slows down in different lineal and cyclical directions. Among their collective gestures, Birdhead also shares a Daoist tolerance for the acceptance of the ugly that seems to fit into the Chinese psyche’s subjectivities of nothingness that can be manifested in two ways:

One is a negation of bodily desires, sensory experience, and everyday emotions such as happiness and anger, joy and sorrow, and love and hate. The other is a denial of the notion that beautiful and ugly, and valuable and dispensable are the content of our mental activities. (Fan and Sullivan 2010, 562)

These feelings of the ugly are the multi-sensory experiences of material and ideological circumstances in other late-capitalist urban public spaces (Ngai 2007). Their autobiographical sense of place is waiting to be rhizomatically incorporated through the hidden tensions of these new villages. Their spatial proximity and distance permeate what Lin (2019) considers the strain that lies between the suppressed Maoist past versus the “consumer society” of the post-socialist present.

Once perceived as a revolutionary footprint, the edges of the new villages were created in the post-1950s era. At that time, Mao’s anti-bourgeoisie strategic plans antagonistically ended up in megalopolises that stretched out from urban into rural areas. Here a parallel could be set with the Freudian need to quest for freedom from the father-figure, represented by old socialist Maoist ideology (and its continuity in post-socialist China), which is linked to the need to return to the nativist, the “naturalness” of the motherland in an intimate, loving way (Gao 2011). The art critic Gao (2011) notes that the contrast of several forms of authoritarian subjectivity can always sustain any Chinese subject. This is also evident, as Gao (2011) notes, in contemporary artists whose subjectivities are rounded up by what he calls “*bentu*” or “native land” as a kind of imagined Chinese subject: “without the sustenance of the earth it would be very difficult for a tree to be a sky-reaching tree” (ibid. 106). Gao claims that this Chinese *bentu* is rearticulated in an indigenous “performative body”, without necessarily conceding to nationalist cultural essentialism. This confrontation in Birdhead’s photographic subjectivities can be interpreted as an aesthetic disruption of causality that is underlined by the conflict between Mao’s socialism and global capitalism, both being torn between two Fathers and Birdhead’s nativistic love of the motherland. However, it should be noted that the tension caused by the state’s prioritization of urbanizing the rural is not a new phenomenon in China, since the city has always been confronted with discourses of “the rural and socialism” (Jie 2006, 323). All these subjectivities represent states of de-naturalization, which Birdhead’s photography attempts to re-naturalize through their synthesized young subjectivities. The external differences of all those subjectivities are internalized, becoming internal differences to their photographic machinery understood as a whole entity. By doing that, Birdhead is naturalizing and de-naturalizing the temporal trajectories of new villages.

The curator Hantao notes that in the new villages and “in the new settlements, only Shanghainese have occupied these places, and a kind of local privileged status emerged with a relatively well-paid job security, since the end of the 1950s” (Interview, February 4th, 2016). It is important to stress Birdhead’s relatively privileged socio-economic status to understand part of their visual discourse, which is much more cosmopolitan than the less favourable comparative and conservative belief systems of their parent’s generation and other new marginal groups of “floating population” (*mangliu*, a pejorative word that categorizes migrants with beggars), who have populated Shanghai in the last decades (Ortells-Nicolau 2017). This situation has become even more critical since “Chinese urban youth appear to be both eager for individual self-expression and dismal pragmatists bent on the goal of the ‘middle-class dream’ based on material achievement” (Figure 1) (Kang 2011, 76). Birdhead’s life-journey photography can be located in this “middle-class dream” that is yelling to get access to an alternative system in which “other” desirable commodities and lifestyle experiences can be attained. This could be partly due to the fact that Birdhead’s generation “lives in an era when material things have become increasingly abundant, and the marketing of almost all products is aimed at their taste. Therefore, the ‘post-1980s’ youth naturally have a kind of feeling of superiority towards material things” (Hongping 2014, 969). Simultaneously, Birdhead’s Bourriaudian micro-utopic relational aesthetics of place evoke individual emotional performances that can legitimize heterogeneous “minor” bohemian voices of the city (Figures 1 and 2). Birdhead’s photography connotes an expression of identity that leaves room for the intersubjective individual and social bonds that actualize the creation of place in a constructive and alternative fashion.

On the other hand, Birdhead’s place-making paradigms have also been driven by their passive subjectivities that incorporate changes in the values of Shanghai’s younger generations, closely associated with their consciousness and delusions. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the images appear reluctant to present the viewer with a real post-experience of the former industrial past of the new villages. Birdhead’s photography seems to internalize the emotions of indifference and the disenfranchised “floating population” migrants, but the *Xincun* appears as a minor *jia* (the family also understood as the Chinese nation). As the large grid in Figure 2 highlights, this time the new village is not presented with the traditional socialist body types, such as the soldier or worker, or with the usual slogans. This time the new village is an emotional cartography of playful disarrayed neo-bohemian lives who love to hang out at nightspots in such new villages. Their irrational manoeuvres do not restrain their desires to interrogate important questions about just what it means to live or to be in Shanghai, and how young Chinese people regard the modern city, without necessarily addressing these issues into a larger collective memory of place.



Figure 2. View of *Xincun* Village. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiyu (2008)

Still, the architecture of the *Xincun* has incarnated the collective (Chinese) dream life of the socialist city-planning period. In this respect, the curator Hantao enlarges the historical knowledge of the *Xincun* when he says: “the new villages become one of those important socialist creations of 1950s Shanghai, in which Mao wanted to conquer and expand the city into the countryside. His goal was the implementation of collective forms of social and urban management” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). From this quote, it can be understood that Birdhead divulges a characteristically socialist sense of place based on implicit development in which the industrialization and urbanization of the rural stand in the foreground. Mao became increasingly focused on the phenomena of the material growth of urban areas, where concerns regarding the fringes of the city as being culturally diverse were considered irrelevant (Visser 2010).

Birdhead’s imagery is suggestive of multiplicity, as shown in Figures 2, 6 and 7, in which Chinese characters and botanical zones and six-story socialist building blocks contrast with young-looking neo-bohemian characters, and all this anarchy together substantiates an index that it is framed as a place that could be any city in the world. This extrinsic association of the sign can be understood as a structure of memory, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari (1987), that can be moulded

across time between Birdhead's photographs and their indexical objects. Overall, Birdhead's subjective performance constructions are meant to provoke reflection through problematizing a flow of chaotic emotions between bodies and things that "disengage the ordered flow of experience into singularities" (Colebrook 2002, 24). And it is by no means uncertain that Birdhead's inter- and intra- multi-sensorial visual syntax revisits the moral character of Chinese figurative compositions that condense traditional collective belief systems. This question goes back to the ontology of performative documentary photography, which reformulates the relationship between reality and representational realism.

Migrant (Sedentary)–Nomad (Cosmopolitan)–Sensorial Homely Rural–Urban Lines of Flight

Birdhead's corporeal intensities of the city are dense with visual detail, providing a fresh interpretation of the material. We can describe this process as a two-step flow through temporal actions related to the sedentary and nomadic. The first temporal origin refers to a parenthesis that introduces two historical planes of reversed directions in a concrete spatial and historical segment of post-socialist China (between the post-socialist and the "cyclical" timeless timeline). The second direction "actualizes" the past and present with (trans-)historical personal moments interrelated through Birdhead's reminiscences of their lives. As will be further discussed, the present is translated and re-translated by their "*bentu*" domestic past and "being *bentu*(ed)" or becoming "contemporary" lines of time (Gao 2011).



Figures 3 and 4. View of *Xincun* Village. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiyu (2008)

On the one hand, Birdhead's inherited migrant experiences can be seen as a form of soulful, timeless escapism that makes the two young artists feel a sense of atomized freedom from the restraint of a rigidly controlled society. As Song Tao puts it, "what you see in these photographs is us, we are the trees, ruins, birds, friends, and the air that breathes around these places in conjunction with our own local culture" (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Song Tao succinctly explains how their experiences are moving towards gradually intensifying the sensations of the *Xincun*: "we like to pursue our own truths that can be found in these places. We do not like to think. You can see houses, walls, grass, people, and other types of materiality and texture all infinitely interconnected through pure old Chinese sensation: a four seasons poem" (Figure 2, 3 and 4) (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Within their migratory lines of flight towards a "being in time", represented also by the calligraphy as a form of permanence in flux, Birdhead is reflecting ethical Daoist and Buddhist metaphysic realities. This historic logic of permanence crosses over and draws out conventional Chinese tropes of "emptiness" and "inaction" (Li and Gong 1999). This also adds an indigenous complex structure to the emotional understanding of their photography. The consequences brought by decades of globalization and rapid modernization have repurposed contemporary artists' reflections on the identity of Chinese art and the social bonds with the artist's sense of place (Wang 2018).

On the other hand, returning to their personal embodied narratives, Song Tao's remarks make an explicit allusion to their cosmopolitan spaces of belonging: "our financial pressure and desire to advance professionally have allowed us to temporally travel around the world, but we always want to come back home" (Interview, April 14th, 2015). What is ventured here is the reinvigoration of both Deleuzian concepts of the sedentary and nomadic. In other words, the desire to return to their home through an imaginary past, and travel abroad as nomads, maps out their transnational forms of belonging/non-belonging and reveals aspects of the mechanical and non-mechanical laws that appear to govern their trajectories and senses of longing within the *Xincun* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Thus, these evolving standpoints of the world in Birdhead's landscapes swing back and forth between the need to connect to a pre-revolutionary local sense of China, inasmuch as they undertake the visual field of a cosmopolitan and desirable sense of place that is very much connected with advanced capitalism and mobility (Braidotti 2011). The resulting rural-urban ambiguity of this nativist-cosmopolitan synergy is manifested in the extension of the worldview they grew up with that destroys dominant codes and discourses of the emblematic new village's communist arrangements. In one of their own ethnographic

readings, Song Tao emphatically claims, “We look for diversity. We like to travel, but we like it here too. Our photos also display the huge changes that the *Xincun* went through” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). From this statement, one might think of their nomadic thought as one that opens free-thinking as a way of passing through, to resist hegemony, and “reflects the existential situation as a multicultural individual, a migrant who turned nomad” (Braidotti 2011, 21). Through displaying their social practices in central galleries around the world, such as MoMA in New York, they not only receive financial support to extend their long-standing mission—to keep photographing Shanghai—but also to engage meaningfully within the contemporary art world.

The incongruities set out above can be chartered tangibly in favour of shifting perceptions of Birdhead’s creativity, thereby reimagining the metaphysics of their sense of place within a plane of imminence, which folds their own becoming as subjects and their experience of differences together (Sutton and Martin-Jones 2008). The non-human aspects of the *Xincun*, as Song Tao expounds, can release the functions of the architecture and objects: “when we shoot, we know everything is moving around us, feelings and emotions change. We are after the thrilling intensity of the *Xincun*. Noises from roosters, dogs, birds, insects, as well as smells and visualizations coming off from all types of sensory elements in the city” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Their individuated cartography of emotional spaces resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s “geology of affects” that stir a kind of catharsis, as one that “exists only in the mixture” in which events and the boundary definitions that have traditionally featured in classical Chinese art, such as ink painting and calligraphy, are also re-territorialized (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 474) (Figures 3 and 4). The mural landscape as a symbol within a photograph does not have a stationary symbolic meaning, but its “texture” is embodied as a mode to communicate with local audiences. The landscape feelings exist *a priori*, as a precondition to the interconnect-edness that might affectively produce social bonds of cultural appreciation to nourish local and national identities. This is what Sedgwick (2003) affirmed about “texture” as a non-dualistic vehicle to revisit people’s own history. Despite their return to a nativist engagement with the vernacular landscape, their capacity to nurture questions of the *Xincun* that resound with inhabitants, and therefore, to prompt them to partake in creative dialogue, might not be straightforward. As has happened before, intellectuals and artists have not necessarily connected with the still primarily peasant population and their political agency (Zhang 2013).



Figure 5. View of *Xincun* Village. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiye (2008)

This return as a form of Chinese nativism is obvious when Song Tao posits that “we are a bit literati. We like to point to the green areas of the *Xincun*. We collect things in these areas that may have some sort of origin in our local heritage” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Birdhead recreates, as we have pointed out, the nativist or *bentu* timeline, which as Wu Hung (2012) claims is always manifested by contemporary artists, as a form of “contemporaneity”. A seeking out or returning to a kind of cyclical modern idealized paradise, as their own home-grown ways of being (in time) in the present. Birdhead’s re-interpretation of concrete ruins is also combined with a kind of abstract deep-need for lyricism inspired by calligraphy: the solitary trees, and other sensorial or inorganic elements, that place them adjacent to the literati tradition of realism—to express negative emotions or certain moods of loss (Wu

2012). The ruins as a mythic schema of romanticism in the West may have some slightly different connotations in China. Their bodies among the ruination of the *Xincun* might embody an inexorable process of mutation between the demolition of its past and the construction of its future. This perception surpasses the introspective gesture to lament the past, as faceless ruins of the poetic genre labelled *huaigu*, in the Tang dynasty (618–917). Such poetic feelings were represented by the lyrical memory of ancient Chinese poets (ibid. 2012) (Figure 5). As Song Tao claims, “ruins are internalized and represent our emotions, like sadness and the crap of the rapid changes in the city. But also, they let us remember the happy times. There is no time for melancholy, the city moves too fast” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). However, their “minor emotions” might also be so small and ambiguous that their making of a place and perception of the reality of the *Xincun* might be questioned.

Their poetic sense of place is also well-versed in the forces of capitalism and the echoes of socialism. Both macro subjectivities have been entrapped into their tangible and yet intangible everyday lives, which could end up in eternal emotional “returns” that establish the same relationships among them. That is to say, the eternal return of these macro-subjectivities can be appreciated from a Deleuzian prism to return to the non-identical of any given subjectivity. In other words, to heighten the form of the material without denaturalizing it. This is obtained via the principle of pleasure, where Birdhead personalizes the real. In the *History of Sexuality* (1985) Foucault claims that desire has never been a problematic subject in Chinese art history, but pleasure has always been absent, and this opens the possibility of a “Chinese subject” or Chinese monument that has frozen people’s desires (Deleuze 1988). For Deleuze, Foucault’s pleasure is what stops the immanent unfolding of desire, as he claims: “from my point-of-view, this is precisely how desire is brought under the law of lack, and in line with the norm of pleasure” (ibid., 131). Ji Weiyu expresses his personal pleasure in enjoying life, “we like to do what young people do, we like parties, we sexually desire and all these things are naturally part of our work. You can see this in the images. The girl in the snapshots is part of our teenage fantasies, she is so pretty” (Interview, April 14th, 2015). Therefore, Birdhead also fight to extend the outer edges without limits, using such an internalized male gaze’s encounters and other desirable spaces for young people, which are randomly replicated in their photos to establish a dialogue with the hanging clothes in the six-floor blocks and their inhabitants.



Figure 6. View of *Xincun Village*'s interior. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiyu (2006)

This cacophony of subjects and objects “construct situations” of multiplicity and difference to re-arrange a non-alienating daily life (Figures 2 and 5). However, this collective act of affection to objects is infused by the cosmopolitan discourse that reflects on the Westernization of youth culture in Shanghai, which could be regarded as an archive of Birdhead’s happy things. Building on this dual territory of the sedentary and nomadic, Birdhead’s sense of place is also rescued by a variety of cosmopolitan objects, more associated with popular culture, as captured within the interior of their domestic rooms that recreate such a plane of immanence across their housing estate sites. The artists show what is enclosed in the interior of their own apartment blocks (shown in Figure 6), where Japanese toys, empty Coca-Cola bottles, and television screens take the viewer further in another spatial direction, and this is more in accord with the successes of commercialization and rational progress of the post-socialist city. Ahmed (2004) elucidates how the politics of happy feelings can interconnect people and ideologies. This also conversely means that Birdhead’s archive of “happy objects” might not correspond with hegemonic objects of happiness that Chinese society expects to be consumed by masculine young subjects. In China, consumerism is also privileging this notion of “correct objects” to reorganize the world, both symbolically

and economically, as adequate material things for achieving happiness. Beyond the obvious, as Ahmed (2004) claims, the turn towards happiness comes with the intention that happiness will arrive if “we” as subjects assimilate adequate objects’ value and relevance. Birdhead do not promise happiness to everyone who interacts with their archive of happy objects, since their objects do not point toward heteronormative lifestyles. Ahmed (2004) also draws from Judith Butler, to make a similar point, which means that these objects can shape bodies. The moulding of Birdhead’s bodies through these objects might point to alternative forms of performing manhood to those sanctioned discourses of non-troubled masculine gender role expectations. This is an opportunity for young spectators to reflect upon “unhappy” or inadequate objects and subjects. It is of vital importance to explore such extreme spatiality, as Nolan (2021) asserts, where high-rise household realities and online surveillance technologies have alienated the young to the point that they are indifferent to their own localities.

Subordinating Birdhead’s artistic skills to ordinary life, and hoping that audiences are willing to accept new aesthetic experiences can be hard. Under circumstances when the relation of forces and social actors is weak, the rhizome may break. Bishop (2011) perceptively points out that artists should be devoted to maintaining a tension between art and that which is social to keep up the deception of reality and illusion being together. What is also interesting is Birdhead’s consumerist expressions of presenting the “Chinese body” as a “desired body”, one that is very sellable in popular culture magazines and among social media influencers. This obsession with the body also insinuates a certain sense of individual freedom as opposed to collective orthodoxy. Birdhead’s distinctively youthful bodies being lodged into buildings and landscapes reveal that *Xincun*’s Maoist dream could not last forever (Figures 7 and 8). By establishing these limits, and sustaining those tensions, Birdhead’s place-based art might still be excluding the “majoritarian” spectator, who is not able to affectively attach to this “minor” post-socialist neo-bohemian habitus.

While Birdhead’s neo-bohemian bodies shed light on alternative desired subjects, within the mechanism of celebrity culture and the entertainment industry they also reproduce neoliberal subjectivities and a “cool” cosmopolitan sense of place (Yang and Xu 2017). Emotional desires, such as fashionable and trendy postures, sexual activity, or alcohol-fuelled parties, altogether produce new spaces filled with privileged youngsters that may not be completely representative of the “new villages” or Shanghai itself (Figures 6 and 7). Their pictures of the alternative consumeristic culture attempt to go beyond the performance or the “factory”, which according to Deleuze is too disciplinary, and instead use the concept of the “theatre” as a way through which desire is mobilized in the style of “guerrilla

fashion” (Cull 2009, 6). On the one hand, this living theatrical outlook has a weak link with Deleuze’s concept of the theatre as a medium to attach their network images to real life. On the other hand, their desired machine unconscious can generate a completely transformative engagement with a “minoritarian other” to a search for rhizomatic hideaways that are accompanied by the entrepreneurial “factory” discipline of capitalism and socialism with Chinese undertones. The relationship between both scenarios of “factory” and “theatre” is continuous and synchronizes with their nomadic cosmopolitan space, whose sedentary “emotional” modes also territorialize the assemblage of traditional *bentu* art and a local past, unique to the *Xinxun*’s New Village community.



Figures 7 and 8. Views of *Xincun* Village. Source: Song Tao and Ji Weiyu (2008)

Conclusion

Drawing on the artists' own intimate local memories and experiences as minoritarian residents, this article has looked at the role of a type of Chinese documentary photography in early 21st century Shanghai that has long been ignored by the Chinese post-socialist mainstream media. In Birdhead's performative photography, the viewer is confronted with a large assortment of the material environment where objects and subjects interrelate and affect one another. This unearths a heterogenous interplay between technology, bodies, affects, objects, and the material environment that transcends Chinese documentary photography from the semiotic and formalist intervention of the author along with the dematerialization of digital photography. Therefore, Birdhead's tactics with regard to "materiality", we contend, do not strengthen a dualist opposition between the "objective" (material) and the "subjective" (Chinese art metanarratives/cognitive visions/contemporaneous ways of being in time). Instead, performative photography must work with a varies conception of visual culture that enables both the material and immaterial.

As is argued in the article, Birdhead's performing bodies demonstrate the ways in which affections and the performing body in Chinese contemporary artistic photography theory, with its rhizomatic intersections with the city, need to be re-addressed through affective and new materialist approaches. Birdhead's performative adventures have become competing spaces with connections and tensions between their young selves and the city, as well as between repressed socialism versus a consumer society found in these post-socialist *Xincun*. Their bodies and responsive photography personify a minor "collective people" whose neo-bohemian bodies and relationships with the environment become an archive of alternative affections to the official emotional strategies of the post-socialist representation of the New Villages in a changing Shanghai. However, their geographies can be either representational or non-representational, underlying an ambiguous meaning, that is, their hybrid performance impels material affects on how the *Xincun* come to be physically structured.

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From Heretic to Hedonist: Kang Youwei's Transformation of Yang Zhu

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Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals had to respond to the dire situation of their country. Against this background, the leading intellectual Kang Youwei aimed to re-establish some traditional values. Although Yang Zhu had long been employed rhetorically in pre-modern China, Kang reconstructed Yang Zhu as an ancient master who had a coherent theory centered around two expressions: *wei wo* (serving one's own interest) and *zong yu* (indulging in desires). However, there is a tension in Kang's attitudes towards Yang Zhu: on the one hand, he criticizes Yang Zhu for when he reflects upon the despotic nature of Chinese governance; on the other hand, Kang sees the positive sides of *wei wo* and *zong yu* in the achievement of the Great Unity. Despite the ambiguity, Kang's choice of vocabulary still made an impact to the portrayals of Yang Zhu after his: his portrayal turned this master into someone highly relevant to modern China; he also showed the possibility of reading Yang Zhu in a positive light.

Keywords: Kang Youwei, Yang Zhu, modernity, *wei wo*, *zong yu*

Od heretika do hedonista: Kang Youweijevo preoblikovanje Yang Zhuja

Izvilleček

Ob koncu devetnajstega stoletja so se morali kitajski intelektualci odzvati na grozljivi položaj svoje države. Na tej osnovi si je vodilni intelektualec Kang Youwei prizadeval ponovno vzpostaviti nekatere tradicionalne vrednote. Čeprav se je ime Yang Zhu v pred-moderni Kitajski dolgo uporabljalo v retoričnem pomenu, je Kang Youwei rekonstruiral Yang Zhuja kot starodavnega mojstra, ki je imel koherentno teorijo, osredotočeno na dva izraza: *wei wo* (služiti lastnemu interesu) in *zong yu* (prepuščanje željam). V Kangovem odnosu do Yang Zhuja pa vseeno obstaja napetost: po eni strani kritizira Yang Zhuja glede razmišljanja o despotski naravi kitajskega vladanja. Po drugi strani pa Kang vidi pozitivne vidike konceptov *wei wo* in *zong yu* v doseganju Velike enotnosti. Kljub tej dvoumnosti je Kangova izbira besedišča v opisovanju Yang Zhuja vplivala na kasnejše, ker je tega mojstra spremenila v nekoga, ki je zelo pomemben za sodobno Kitajsko. Poleg tega pa je pokazal tudi možnost branja in razumevanja Yang Zhuja v pozitivni luči.

Ključne besede: Kang Youwei, Yang Zhu, modernost, *wei wo*, *zong yu*

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Introduction

By the mid-19th century, the traditional Sinocentric worldview was no longer suitable for China in a world of nations. In what Chang Hao calls the “transitional period”, China was undergoing a national crisis both politically and existentially¹ (Chang 1999, 29). Toward the last quarter of the 19th century, Chinese intellectuals had to respond to the dire “historical situation” and “existential situation” the nation faced (Chang 1987, 4). They not only were forced to re-examine the inherited political order, but also had to find ways to negotiate the legitimacy of traditional Chinese concepts. At the end of the 19th century, scepticism of the functional effectiveness of the institutional order as well as its moral legitimacy was widely prevalent (ibid., 5). It was against this background that Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), a leading intellectual and political activist in the late Qing dynasty, aimed to “reveal” the truth of traditional Chinese thought by reconstructing Chinese intellectual history and re-establishing traditional values. In this process, the pre-Qin master Yang Zhu 楊朱 (who allegedly lived around 400 BC) was given an important role. In contemporary academic discourse, Yang Zhu is discussed as the founder of the Yangism, whose theory is characterized by its emphasis on maintaining physical integrity. He is also labelled a Daoist, hedonist, individualist, and egoist on the basis of the fragmented information preserved in early sources. Perhaps the most influential portrayal of Yang Zhu comes from the *Mencius*, which associates Yang Zhu with the expression *wei wo* 為我 (“serving one’s own interest”), and depicts Yang Zhu as someone who is unwilling to sacrifice one hair for the benefit of the world. A similar description of Yang Zhu can also be found in the *Liezi*,² of which the seventh chapter is titled “Yang Zhu”. Modern reconstructions of Yang Zhu’s hedonistic ideas usually take this chapter as their main reference (Brindley 2022).³ This paper aims to show that these modern constructions of Yang Zhu were only possible because of Kang’s unprecedented transformation of Yang Zhu. Before Kang, the Yang Zhu figure—who had no full book recorded to his name—had barely received any detailed scholarly attention (Defoort 2020a, 235–56). It was Kang who pulled Yang Zhu into discussions of the relationship between individuals and the nation, which continued reappearing for half a century. It is thus worthwhile to consider what Kang did with Yang Zhu, and how the latter fitted into his project. This investigation not only shows Kang Youwei from a novel perspective, but also unravels some major constituents of Yang Zhu’s modern portrayal.

1 Chang Hao defines the “transitional period” as the 25 years between 1895 and 1920 when Chinese intellectual thought transformed from traditional to modern.

2 Many scholars have questioned the date, the author, and the content of the text of the *Liezi*.

3 Whether the “Yang Zhu” chapter in the *Liezi* represents Yang Zhu’s ideas is beyond the scope of my current discussion. Discussion of this matter can be found in Brindley (2022).

Regarding Kang Youwei, extant scholarship tends to focus on either his role in political history or his adoption and transformation of Confucianism (Bell 2010; Gan 2003; Jiang 2003). The few studies of Kang's views on non-Confucian thought include Wei Yixia's research on Kang's views on the pre-Qin masters⁴ (Wei 2014, 14–17; 2017, 40–45), Lee Ting-mien's paper on the role of Mohism in Kang's arguments for his New Text Theory of Confucianism (Lee 2020, 461–77), and Carine Defoort's examination of Yang Zhu in Kang's *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (*Confucius as a Reformer*) (Defoort 2020a, 250–53). Still, how Kang discusses the masters in light of his own political imagination and how he transforms the masters' theories remain rather overlooked in the field.

Regarding Yang Zhu, contemporary scholarship tends to ruminate on whether the accepted portrayals offer accurate accounts of his philosophy without acknowledging when and how these portrayals came to be (Shi 2015, 11–18; Huang 2008, 13–15). Some also study the modern portrayals of Yang Zhu, but these discussions appear to be built upon the assumption that these portrayals are modern expressions of the authentic philosophy of Yang Zhu (He 2015). An exception might be Li Yucheng's study of the historical constructions of Yang Zhu's image as a “heretic”, in which he traces the representative texts that present portrayals of Yang Zhu from different periods in Chinese history and argues that Yang Zhu's image as a heretic was amplified after the Tang-Song dynasty to serve the needs of the time (Li 2017, 51–61). Nonetheless, a detailed study of the novel and various portrayals of Yang Zhu in modern China is still lacking.

Combining Kang and Yang, this paper aims to offer a case study of Kang's transformation of the heretic Yang Zhu. I demonstrate how for the first time in Chinese intellectual history Yang Zhu was attributed an elaborate, coherent theory instead of being taken as a mere rhetorical tool, as well as how Kang turned this traditional underdog into someone relevant to modern China. By taking a closer look at the lecture notes transcribed by Kang's students in 1896⁵ and his writings before 1904,⁶ this paper examines Kang's portrayal of Yang Zhu in a way that departs

4 Wei has done a series of studies on Kang's views on the pre-Qin masters.

5 There are four transcribed notes of Kang's speeches during the time he taught at Wanmu Caotang (Myriad Trees Academy), in which Kang discussed Yang Zhu. Among these four, “*Nanhai shicheng ji* 南海師承記 (*The Records Made when I Studied under my Teacher Nanhai*)” was transcribed by Kang's student Zhang Bozhen 張伯楨 (1877–1949). The transcript of “*Kang Nanhai xiansheng jiangxue ji* 康南海先生講學記 (*The Notes of the Lectures of Mr. Kang Nanhai*)” is provided by Zhang's son Zhang Cixi 張次溪 (1909–1968). The transcribers of the “*Wanmu Caotang koushuo* 萬木草堂口說 (*The Speeches Recorded in the Myriad Trees Academy*)” and “*Wanmu Caotang jiangyi* 萬木草堂講義 (*The Lecture Notes at the Myriad Trees Academy*)” are unknown.

6 See Kang, *Kangzi nei wai pian* 康子內外篇 (*Esoteric and Exoteric Essays of Master Kang*) (2007b). See also, Kang, *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (*Kongzi as a Reformist*) (2007h). See also, Kang, *Deguo youji* 德國游記 (*Travels in Germany*) (2007j).

from the longstanding Yang-Mo trope, as an independent early master whose lineage is associated with Laozi. For Kang, Yang Zhu's theory is mainly characterized by two interrelated expressions: *wei wo*, attributed to him by Mencius, and *zong yu* 縱慾 ("indulging in desires"), attributed to him by Kang.⁷ These two expressions made Yang Zhu indispensable in Kang's discussion of the fate of modern China: on the one hand, he criticizes Yang Zhu for promoting *wei wo* and *zong yu* when he reflects upon the despotic nature of Chinese governance; on the other hand, Kang sees the positive sides of *wei wo* and *zong yu* in the achievement of *Datong* 大同 (Great Unity). Even though he does not explicitly refer to Yang Zhu in his positive evaluation, the connection seems to be implicitly present in the combined use of these two expressions. In this paper, I first outline Kang's general portrayal of Yang Zhu. Then I introduce Kang's negative and positive readings of Yang Zhu's doctrines of *wei wo* and *zong yu*. The order of my discussion of the related sources is thematic rather than chronological, which hopefully better presents Kang's implicit transformation of the image of Yang Zhu.

Kang's Portrayal of Yang Zhu

As Yang Zhu is supposedly a pre-Qin figure to whom short comments and anecdotes in some early texts refer,⁸ Kang's attempt to portray this figure becomes a selective highlighting and interpretation of certain traits that are presented or suggested in these references. Three key points in Kang's portrayal of Yang Zhu are his doctrine of *wei wo*, his doctrine of *zong yu*, and his association with Laozi.

The first well-known notion associated with Yang Zhu and picked up by Kang, namely *wei wo*, can be traced to the *Mencius*. According to the *Mencius*, Yang Zhu and Mozi are the masters whose teachings flow throughout the world (Bloom 2011, 70). Mencius's statement about Yang Zhu and Mozi "totally blocking humaneness and righteousness 充塞仁義" also set the tone for a negative image of Yang Zhu in later generations (Defoort 2020a, 242). Another statement Mencius attributes to Yang Zhu portrays him as someone who maintains the idea of *wei*

7 Although there were portrayals of Yang Zhu's hedonism made by Japanese scholars before Kang, they did not use the term *zong yu*.

8 The earliest appearances of Yang Zhu can be found in the sources drafted from the pre-Qin era to the Han dynasty, such as the *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, *Huainanzi*, *Liezi*, *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (*Garden of Stories*), *Hanshu* 漢書 (*Book of Han*), and *Zhonglun* 中論 (*Discussions on the Mean Way*). In the *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü*), there also seems to be a Yang Sheng 陽生 who promotes ideas on valuing the self, which is also considered to be the textual evidence of Yang Zhu.

wo and would not even pull out a single hair for the benefit of the world⁹ (Bloom 2011, 150). Although this portrayal may have been an invention of Mencius's and did not receive much attention from his contemporaries or other pre-Han generations (Defoort 2018, 165–84), the concise expression *wei wo* was so powerful that it became the dominant characteristic identified with Yang Zhu from at least the Song dynasty onward (Defoort 2020a, 247–50). In line with this tradition, Kang also describes Yang Zhu with the expression *wei wo*. However, there are two twists to Kang's reading of Yang Zhu's *wei wo*, which also lead to the other two key points of Kang's portrayal, namely, Yang Zhu's doctrine of *zong yu* and his association with Laozi.

The second notion that Kang comes up with, *zong yu*, has a totally different origin and history. An examination of the *Diaolong* Database of the Full Chinese and Japanese Classical Texts shows that before the Qing dynasty, the term *zong yu* was not mentioned in relation to Yang Zhu, and when Yang Zhu was discussed in terms of his attitude towards *yu* 欲 (“human desires”), he was associated with Laozi and was characterized as someone *wu yu* 無欲 (“without desires”). The earliest use of the term *zong yu* can be found in the “*Wanmu Caotang koushuo* 萬木草堂口說 (The Speeches Recorded in the Myriad Trees Academy)” (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 132), a collection of Kang's lecture notes recorded by one of his students in 1896. Here Kang states that “Yang Zhu places emphasis on *zong yu* 楊朱講求縱慾”¹⁰ (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 177). For Kang, the relation between *wei wo* and *zong yu* is a relation between ideology and practice: “Yang Zhu holds ‘*wei wo*’ as his core idea; what he says follows the practice of *zong yu* 楊朱以為我為宗旨，所言以縱慾為事”¹¹ (Kang 2007h, vol. 3, 41). Kang also believes that “Yang's teaching promotes indulging in desires, and thus it flourished 楊氏之學縱慾，故盛行” (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 179). One year later, this conclusion of Yang Zhu's ideology of *wei wo* and his practice of *zong yu* is drawn in the *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (*Confucius as a Reformer*) based on passages Kang quotes from the “Yang Zhu” chapter. These quotes depict Yang Zhu as someone who maintains

9 “Yangzi chooses ‘serving one's own interest.’ If by pulling out a single hair from his own body he could have benefited the entire world, he would not have done it. 楊子取為我，拔一毛而利天下，不為也。”

10 Around the same period, Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) (2019) also describes the main idea of the “Yang Zhu” chapter as “only indulging in the satisfaction of desires 唯縱嗜慾”. Masayuki Sato (2022) argues that the Meiji Japanese scholars who included Yang Zhu in their composition of the history of Chinese philosophy also started to compare Yang Zhu with Epicurus and depicted him as a philosopher who advocated *kairaku shugi* 快樂主義 (“hedonism”).

11 In the edition in *Kang Youwei quanji*, this statement is 楊朱以為愛為宗旨. However, the editors of the Chinese Text Project seem to believe that this statement should be 楊朱以為我為宗旨. Here I follow the editors of the Chinese Text Project and stick with the term 為我.

that “in life, people care for each other; after death, people abandon each other 生相憐，死相捐”，we ought to “act by following one’s heart and not disobey the inclinations of nature 從心而動，不違自然所好”，that “if no one sacrificed a single hair and no one benefited the world, the world would be well governed 人人不損一毫，人人不利天下，天下治也”，and that as for “big houses, pretty clothes, rich flavour, and beauty, if one possessed all four of them, what more would one demand from the external world 丰屋，美服，厚味，姣色，有此四者，何求於外” (Kang 2007h, vol. 3, 40; Yang 1985, 238).¹² The overall image in these statements is of someone who follows his natural disposition, namely by valuing this-worldly carnal enjoyments, and who has little concern about others and the after-life. Despite the fact that Kang does not elaborate on these quotes, this image seems to be what he relies on to present the idea that Yang Zhu’s theory is really about *wei wo* and *zong yu*.

The third key point of Kang’s portrayal is Yang Zhu’s connection with Laozi. The earliest association between Yang Zhu and Laozi can be found in the “Yu Yan” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* and the “Huang Di” chapter of the *Liezi*.¹³ Both these texts record Yang Zhu’s journey to the South and his conversation with his teacher Laozi¹⁴ (Watson 2013, 237; Graham 1990, 51). These two texts also be-

12 Most translations in this paper are my own. Even when references to existing translations are given, I do not always follow them.

13 While in the “Yu Yan” chapter the protagonist of the anecdote is named 陽子居 and in the “Huang Di” chapter he is named Yang Zhu, scholars usually take these two as the same person. Despite the controversy concerning the author and the date of the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*, and that there is a slight difference between what is written in these two texts, they might still be the earliest texts that mention Yang Zhu and Laozi’s meeting.

14 The anecdotes recorded in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi* are highly similar. Here I quote from the *Zhuangzi*. 陽子居南之沛，老聃西遊於秦，邀於郊，至於梁而遇老子。老子中道仰天而歎曰：“始以汝為可教，今不可也。”陽子居不答。至舍，進盥漱巾櫛，脫履戶外，膝行而前曰：“向者弟子欲請夫子，夫子行不閒，是以不敢。今閒矣，請問其過。”老子曰：“而睢睢盱盱，而誰與居？大白若辱，盛德若不足。”陽子居蹶然變容曰：“敬聞命矣。”其往也，舍者迎將其家，公執席，妻執巾櫛，舍者避席，煬者避灶。其反也，舍者與之爭席矣。Yang Ziju went south to Pei, and when he got to Liang, he went out to the edge of the city to greet Lao Dan, who had been traveling west to Qin, and escort him in. Laozi stood in the middle of the road, looked up to heaven, and sighed, saying, “At first I thought that you could be taught, but now I see it’s hopeless!” Yang Ziju made no reply, but when they reached the inn, he fetched a basin of water, a towel, and a comb and, taking off his shoes outside the door of the room, came crawling forward on his knees and said, “Earlier I had hoped to ask you, sir, what you meant by your remark, but I saw that you were occupied and didn’t dare. Now that you have a free moment, may I ask where my fault lies?” Laozi said, “High and mighty, proud and haughty—who could stand no live with you! The greatest purity looks like shame; abundant virtue seems to be insufficient.” When Yang Ziju first arrived at the inn, the people in the inn came out to greet him. The innkeeper stood ready with a mat, his wife with towel and comb, while the other guests moved politely off their mats, and those who had been warming themselves at the stove stepped aside. But when Yang returned from his interview with Laozi, the people at the inn tried to push him right off his own mat. (Watson 2013, 237–38)

came evidence for later scholars to associate Yang Zhu with Laozi. One such person was the Song scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). In response to the question why Mencius did not attack Laozi, he answered that Mencius attacked Yang Zhu because Yang Zhu's learning came from Laozi.¹⁵ In line with these precedents, Kang also saw Yang Zhu as a disciple of Laozi. But no previous scholar had enhanced this lineage connection as much as Kang did. For Kang, the teachings of Laozi and Yang Zhu were essentially one. This is seen in several aspects of Kang's portrayal. First of all, unlike his predecessors, Kang did not merely make a vague claim about the resemblance between Laozi and Yang Zhu's teaching, but rather directly attributed *wei wo* to Laozi. He illustrated Laozi's idea of *wei wo* with the *Book of Changes*: "Laozi's idea of 'wei wo' grasps the gist of four words from the *Book of Changes*: humbleness, receding, modesty, ensnaring 老子'為我者', 得《易經》'卑,退,謙,陷'四字" (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 176). Secondly, Kang contended that Laozi's theory inevitably led to an idea of *zong yu*:

Laozi said: heaven and earth are inhumane. They take everything as straw dogs. Sages are inhumane, they take common people as straw dogs. A lack of humaneness to others leads to *wei wo* and *zong yu*. If one can be *wei wo* and *zong yu*, then he does not take into consideration anyone or anything. He denies both the people and the state. Thus, Mencius considered that a denial of one's ruler.

老子謂：天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。於人不仁，故只為我而已，縱慾而已。苟可以為我縱慾，則一切不顧，無人亦無國，故孟子以為無君。 (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 492–93)

That is also why even though Laozi had many followers, it was Yang Zhu who represented Laozi's teachings the best: "Laozi's followers were divided into so many schools: Zhuang and Lie maintain promoting purity and tenuousness; Yang Zhu puts emphasis on indulging in desires 老子後學，流派甚繁：莊、列主上清虛。楊朱講求縱慾" (ibid., 177). "Yangzi represents Lao's teaching 楊子即老學" (ibid., 144).

Relying on the portrayal of Yang Zhu in the *Mencius*, the overall image suggested in the "Yang Zhu" chapter, and the association between Laozi and Yang Zhu, Kang manages to rescue Yang Zhu from being part of a rhetorical trope and solidifies him as an ancient master with a theory. Having attributed an elaborate theory to Yang Zhu, Kang gives him greater relevance in a modern context.

15 Zhu Xi (s.d.) states that "Yang Zhu's learning came from Laozi 楊朱之學出於老子" and that "in refuting Yang Zhu, Mencius actually refuted Zhuangzi and Laozi 孟子闢楊朱，便是闢莊老了."

A Negative Reading of *wei wo* and *zong yu*.

Traditionally, the heretical Yang Zhu has long been the target of criticism. In line with this tradition, Kang also takes Yang Zhu as someone to blame. However, as the traditional criticism tended to take Yang-Mo as a rhetorical trope due to his threat to the Confucian Way, Kang's reproof towards Yang Zhu leaves out Mozi and pays more attention to Yang Zhu. From Kang's perspective, Yang Zhu's theory characterized by *wei wo* and *zong yu* has debilitated China with its influence on China's governance and the Chinese mentality. This portrayal also relies on Kang's unprecedented emphasis on Yang Zhu's association with Laozi. By firmly merging Laozi and Yang Zhu into one lineage, Kang attributes not only Yang Zhu's doctrine of *wei wo* to Laozi, but also Laozi's *buren* ("inhumaneness") to Yang Zhu. For Kang, the idea of inhumaneness accounts for a political system and mentality founded upon the idea of *ren* 忍 ("indifference"), which is the exact opposite of the idea of *buren* 不忍 ("compassion") that he believes to be ideal for the Great Unity.¹⁶

In his eyes, the problem with the adoption of *wei wo* and *zong yu* in China is that it has the powerful effect of bringing a dynasty to its end. When *wei wo* and *zong yu* are applied, not only are the rulers' actions affected, but the officials are as well. Kang believes that the rulers of China follow Laozi and Yang Zhu's doctrine of *wei wo* so that they "restrain their subjects and take the world as their private possession 鉗製臣民，自私其天下" (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 493). The officials in government also follow the doctrine of *wei wo*, and "in the worst case, they seek private gain 下者營私" while "in the better cases, they cultivate personal integrity 上者獨善" (Kang 2007c, vol. 1, 345). This then leads to the severe situation that a dynasty is brought to its end, which can be shown in two examples Kang offers: "Li Si brought an end to [the Qin dynasty] under the rule of the second emperor and Yang Guang brought an end to the Sui dynasty. [These instances only occurred] because Yang Zhu's theory of indulging in desires set a precedent 李斯之亡二世，楊廣之亡隋，皆楊朱縱欲之說開之也" (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 207).

However, what concerns Kang more is that following Yang Zhu's doctrine is not a problem of the past but an on-going one. It was because Yang Zhu's ideas had already been deeply rooted in the Chinese mind that China was in its weak state.

16 A direct translation of the character *ren* 忍 is "withstanding," "enduring" or "restraining" oneself from. However, in the context of Kang's discussion, this idea should be understood as an opposite of *buren* 不忍 that positively refers to one's inability to endure the suffering of others. *Ren* would then refer to the ability to endure the suffering of others. Here, I follow the translation of Kung-chuan Hsiao (1975) and translate *buren* as compassion. The translation of *ren* as "indifference" is meant to be the opposite of compassion.

For Kang, the “evil of *wei wo* secretly prevailed in the Han dynasty and has not been disposed of to this day 為我之私陰行漢世，至今不廢” (Kang 2007h, vol. 3, 216). It “is the great poison of China 為中國大毒” (Kang 2007, vol. 5i, 493). Because Laozi and Yang Zhu’s theories are popular among the people:

The sages are inhumane; they see the people as the dogs of straw. Therefore, they reduce and exterminate the heart of compassion, becoming more and more indifferent until there is nothing left. Then they act from nothing but the wish to indulge in desires. This is also what ordinary folks enjoy in common, which is why their way still prevails until today. That is poisonous for the Great Way. As I have said, the learning of Lao and Yang brought great calamity to China.

聖人不仁，以萬民為芻狗。故削絕其不忍之心，忍之又忍，以至於無，而惟以縱欲為事。此亦俗人所共樂，故其道至今猶大行，此真大道之蝨賊也。吾嘗謂，老、楊之學為中國之大禍。 (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 497)

Because the spirit of indifference is so prevalent in China,

even the people with great knowledge and noble conduct cannot behave other than prudently and silently and consider nothing but the preservation of their bodies. They sit by negligent of the predicament experienced by their ruler and fathers; they sit by without sympathy for the predicament experienced by their family, teachers and friends; they sit by unconcerned about the subjugation of their nation and the genocide of their people.

雖有碩學高行之人，但為謹默之行，保身之謀。坐視君父之難而不顧，坐視宗親師友之難而不恤，坐視國亡種滅而從容。 (ibid., 497–98)

The prevalence of Yang Zhu’s doctrine was not only affecting China’s present state, but also impacting its future. That is, it was preventing China from achieving the Great Unity. Kang’s vision of the Great Unity is founded upon the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (“humaneness”). Humaneness is not only “the universal virtue for all beings” (Chang 1987, 29), but also a worldview that signifies what the world essentially is or should be (ibid., 37). The idea of humaneness then naturally leads to the idea of compassion and sympathy for other people. As Kang states, “the Confucian Way is founded on humaneness; compassion is its theme; sympathizing with the suffering of the people is its mission 孔子之道本仁，以不忍為宗，以同民患為義” (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 498). The heart of

compassion (*buren* 不忍) is also why the Great Unity is attainable¹⁷ (ibid., 414). Kang describes human history “as proceeding from the chaos generated by selfish instincts to the joyful experience of global peace and commonality” (Brusadelli 2017, 105). In this blueprint, the Great Unity will be realized in the process of humanity overcoming people’s instincts to prioritize their individual selves and finally reaching moral perfection of humaneness. However, “the governance of the world has been dominated by Laozi’s learning for thousands of years 數千年治天下，皆老學” (Kang 2007f, vol. 2, 176). The fundamental difference between Laozi and Confucius is that Laozi’s theory is defined by its inhumaneness and indifference, whereas Confucianism is defined by humaneness and compassion. This means a polity built upon Laozi’s theory would be the exact opposite of the Great Unity. Since Yang Zhu’s notions of *wei wo* and *zong yu* generated from Laozi’s theory of inhumaneness and resulted in a reduction of compassion, to build a polity on Yang Zhu’s theory is to enact the spirit of indifference:

(Laozi) treats others with inhumaneness. Thus, he only acts out of self-interest and that is it; he indulges in desires and that is it. Supposing he can act out of self-interest and indulge in desires, he would not care about anything else, which amounts to a denial of other people and the state. That is why Mencius thinks he dismisses his ruler. 於人不仁，故只為我而已，縱欲而已。苟可以為我縱欲，則一切不顧，無人亦無國，故孟子以為無君。 (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 492–93)

That is to say, because of the enactment of Laozi and Yang Zhu’s theory, China stood far away from the end goal of human history, which is the Great Unity. While still referring to the traditional Mencian comments on *wei wo*, Kang’s interpretation of it in relation to Yang Zhu is nothing short of innovative.

Although Kang’s portrayal of Yang Zhu still echoes the traditional portrayal, it is in fact far from conventional. Kang preserves the negative image traditionally associated with Yang Zhu. But in Kang’s discourse, Yang Zhu was a master identified with specific doctrines. Yang Zhu’s doctrines of *wei wo* and *zong yu*, he believes, were not only adopted by Chinese rulers, but also practiced by Chinese people. They were also problematic, and this dominance of Yang Zhu’s theory explains the weakness of China and why the Great Unity had not been achieved. That being said, Kang’s perception of Yang Zhu is much more complex, and not outrightly negative. In Kang’s earlier writings, his discussion of *wei wo* and *zong yu* shows the possibility of a positive reading of Yang Zhu, even though he is never mentioned there.

17 According to Yang Zhende 楊貞德 (2018, 153–96), the heart of “compassion” (*buren zhi xin* 不忍之心) is the source of the Great Unity.

A Positive Reading of *wei wo* and *zong yu*

The *Datong shu*, which Kang claimed to have begun drafting as early as 1884, probably contains Kang's most advanced ideas regarding an ideal future. Except for the first two chapters, which appeared in Kang's journal *Bu Ren* 不忍, Kang voluntarily kept the *Datong shu* unpublished because he believed the book was too advanced for that time (Brusadelli 2020, 7). Although the question of when the *Datong shu* was composed remains contested,¹⁸ Kang's *datong* ideas were already present before 1884. Another unpublished manuscript bearing the title *Kangzi nei wai pian* 康子內外篇 (*Esoteric and Exoteric Essays of Master Kang*) was written around the same time, namely 1886¹⁹ (Hsiao 1975, 419). While some scholars believe that Kang's "attitude toward the characteristic Confucian values is perceptibly less radical" in the *Nei wai pian*, this manuscript still gives the impression that its general intellectual outlook is identical with the *Datong shu* (ibid., 51). Despite the early date of composition, the ideas in these works were meant for a distant future that China would eventually arrive at. It is also in this manuscript that Kang offers an unconventionally positive reading of the supposedly heretical concepts of *wei wo* and *zong yu*. Although he does not explicitly refer to Yang Zhu, he still discusses the notion of *wei wo* in opposition to the notion of *jian ai* 兼愛 ("undifferentiated love"),²⁰ two expressions consistently associated with Yang Zhu and Mozi, respectively, in Chinese intellectual history. Despite the negative implications that are traditionally attached to these two concepts, Kang manages to offer a naturalistic reading: *wei wo* is transformed from selfish intentions to self-development, and *zong yu* from a negative sense of indulging in desires to a positive sense of giving free rein to one's desires. With

18 Hsiao (1975, 50–55) has presented a debate on dating the composition of *Datong shu*.

19 James Z. Gao (2009, 298) states that the *Kangzi nei wai pian* is a collection of fifteen essays written around 1886, of which nine were published in *The China Discussion* (*Qingyibao* 清議報) in 1899, and the remaining six remained unpublished. Kang explains that the "esoteric essays deal with the principles governing Heaven, earth, man, and things", while the "exoteric essays cover matters relative to government, education, arts, and music". Although this explanation can be found in Kang's self-edited chronological biography, it is impossible for us to tell which essays belong to the esoteric or to the exoteric. Although these essays do not present a systematic philosophy, according to Hsiao Kung-chuan (1975, 419), they still indicate the general tenor of Kang's thinking at this stage. The ideas expressed in these essays can even be read as the precursors of what will later be developed in the *Book of Great Unity*. *Qingyibao* was a newspaper founded on December 23, 1898, by Liang Qichao after he was exiled to Japan; its purpose was to introduce Western political theories and democratic ideas to China. *Qingyibao* was published every 10 days. Each issue included political editorials, news, translations, and book reviews. *Qingyibao* criticized the Qing conservatives headed by Dowager Empress Cixi and praised the Guangxu emperor, who supported radical reform. The mission of the newspaper was to advocate Liang's ideal of constitutional reform. On December 21, 1901, a fire destroyed the paper's offices and its publication ceased.

20 For current views on the translation of the term *jian ai*, see Defoort (2020b, 708–09).

this reading, the concepts of *wei wo* and *zong yu* are incorporated in Kang's vision of the Great Unity and transformed into ideas that are crucial in the achievement of the Great Unity.

An indication of Yang Zhu's presence in this chapter might be Kang's discussion of *wei wo* as an opposite to *jian ai*: the concepts of *wei wo* and *jian ai* are both mentioned in the first paragraph and explained as the two extreme sides that mark the periphery of *xue* 學 ("learning")²¹ (Kang 2007b, vol. 1, 107). Although some Neo-Confucians warned against the danger of Mozi's *jian ai* for its resemblance with the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (Cheng and Cheng 1981, 231–32), Kang asserts that "there is no fault with inclusive care 兼愛無弊" (Kang 2007b, vol. 1, 107). However, the situation concerning the concept of *wei wo* seems to be more complicated. Kang explains that:

There are four types of *wei wo*: those who (live) for their dispositions are common people; those who (live) for their reputations are virtuous people; those who (live) for their bodies are Daoists; those who (live) for their souls are Buddhists....

為我有四：一為我之質，眾人是也；一為我之名，賢人是也；一為我之體，道人是也；一為我之魂，佛學是也。²² (ibid.)

As we saw earlier, in the discussions where Kang explicitly associates the notion of *wei wo* with Yang Zhu, it seems to refer to selfishness. However, when Kang discusses the notion of *wei wo* without explicit reference to Yang Zhu, it becomes a concept that resembles self-development towards a designated destination. Being *wei wo* is a neutral concept of choosing to pursue something one cares about.

The discussion on *wei wo* is almost immediately associated with a discussion on *yu* 欲 ("desires"). For Kang, desires are natural endowments of Heaven that should be perceived neutrally. Following the quote above, Kang states that:

Each of these four types is following what their nature is close to, only that common people take interest in shape and bodies, thus, they have

21 "Learning cannot exceed its two extreme sides, serving one's own interest and inclusive caring, that is all. 學不外二端，為我，兼愛而已。"

22 This statement also resembles the four things "Yang Zhu" believed that the living is occupied with: "The things that prevent the living from resting are four: the first is longevity, the second is reputation, the third is social status, and the fourth is possession. 生民之不得休息，為四事故：一為壽，二為名，三為位，四為貨。" See Yang (1985, 235). In Kang's discussion of the theories of the different masters, schools, religions, terms such as *shen* 身 ("body"), *ti* 體 ("disposition"), *hun* 魂 ("soul"), and the *po* 魄 ("animal spirit") are almost always present and function as the standards that classify the different theories. However, Kang is not always consistent with his use of the terms, and he never elaborates on these concepts.

desires. Since these are also endowed by Heaven, they cannot be forbidden. Thus, even sages cannot do without music and sex...

四者各隨其性之所近，惟眾人為形質則有欲，斯亦天之所予，無可禁也。故雖聖人不能無聲色之奉... (ibid.)

That is to say, desires are nothing but one's liking. The reason people have desires is due to the physicality of being human and there is no point in prohibiting desires. However, that does not mean there is no limit for desires. While Kang believes that desires are inherent, he explains that they "cannot be unrestrained 不得肆者" because "Heaven imposes limitations 天有限焉" (such as one's lifespan) and "humans have regulations 人有制焉". "The sages know that desires are rooted in Heaven 聖人知欲之本於天也" so they "serve them 事之", but they also worry that people might indulge in desires, so they make rules to "restrain them" 束之". With this, Kang concludes that "those people who live for themselves, do what they do, and do not do what they should not do; that is all 夫人也，為我之質者，為其所以為，無為其所不為，斯已矣" (ibid.). In other words, being *wei wo* is essentially satisfying the desires given by one's disposition and restraining other desires as necessary.

The close connection between *wei wo* and desires also sheds new light on the concept of *zong yu*, which also implicitly relates to Yang Zhu. In this context, *zong yu* no longer connotes a negative sense of indulging in desires as when it is explicitly associated with Yang Zhu, but rather a positive sense of giving free rein to one's desires:

All creatures that have blood and breath necessarily have desires; having desires, they invariably give them free play.²³ To be without desires is simply to be dead. The most desireless are the Buddhists; but they give free rein to the desire to preserve the soul. The most desireless are the sages; but they give free rein to the desire for humanness and righteousness ...²⁴ Thus, what reins them in is due to having blood and breath, and what gives them free rein is due to having blood and breath.

凡為血氣之倫必有欲，有欲則莫不縱之，若無欲則惟死耳。最無欲者佛，縱其保守靈魂之欲；最無欲者聖人，縱其仁義之欲... 故夫制之者血氣也，縱之者血氣也。 (Kang 2007b, vol. 1, 103–04)

23 The verb Kang uses in this passage to collocate with *yu* 欲 ("desires") is *zong* 縱, which is the same verb in the compound *zong yu* 縱欲 that is attributed to Yang Zhu. I choose to translate the word *zong* as "giving free play" or "giving free rein to" in this passage instead of "indulging in" in previous translations of *zong yu* to highlight the difference of the term when used in different contexts.

24 The translation is based on Hsiao (1975, 157–58).

In this reading, certain desires are repressed so that one can give more important desires free play. But to give free rein to the more important desires and to rein in the less important ones are choices made by humans. In other words, the reason people can restrain or not restrain desires is because we are human.

The concept of *zong yu* is thence incorporated in Kang's narrative of a utopian ideal. Kang believes that compassion (*buren* 不忍) is the foundation for establishing a good polity. According to him, "To take the heart of compassion (as the foundation) and to implement a polity of compassion—even the heart-mind of Yao and Yu was not more than that 以不忍人之心，行不忍人之政，雖堯、禹之心，不過是也" (Kang 2007b, vol. 1, 97). More importantly, compassion is also a type of *yu* that can be given free rein to. From Kang's perspective, although the "heart of compassion" 不忍之心 is restrained by one's power and longevity, the "desire of compassion" 不忍人之欲 has the potential of being freed from restraints (ibid., 104). Not only does Kang believe that the "desire of compassion" can be given free rein, but he also counts on it. It is exactly because of the restraints put on compassion by people's lifespan and the limited population that only by giving free rein to an individual's desire of compassion that the effect of compassion can be strengthened. This idea of "compassion" is so crucial that later it is developed into the core of the attainment of the Great Unity in Kang's *Eso-teric Meanings of the Mencius*, drafted around 1902 (Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 498).²⁵

The heart of compassion ... Everyone has it. That is why Mencius says that humans by nature are all good. Since there is already the heart of compassion, it spreads outward and thus forms the polity of compassion. If humans did not have the heart of compassion, even the sages would not have had this seed, and then all the humane polity would have nothing to grow from. Thus, we know that all humane polities grow from the heart of compassion. It is the sea of myriad transformations, the root of everything, the origin of everything. This one kernel can grow into a tree that reaches into the sky; this one drop can multiply into a sea. The humane caring of humanity, the civilization of humanity, the evolution of humanity, even universal peace and great unity all come out of it.

不忍人之心.....人人皆有之，故謂人性皆善。既有此不忍人之心，發之於外，即為不忍人之政。若使人無此不忍人之心，聖人亦無此種，即無從生一切仁政。故知切仁政皆從不忍之心生，為萬化之海，為一切根，為一切源。一核而成參天之樹，一滴而成大海之水。人道之仁愛，人道之文明，人道之進化，至於太平大同，皆從此出。(Kang 2007i, vol. 5, 414)

25 Some chapters of this book were published in *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 (*New People's Journal*) and *Buren* 不忍 separately in 1902 and 1913. The whole book was not published until 1916.

Thus, what makes the Great Unity achievable is the inherent compassion in all humans. It is also due to humans' ability to choose which desires are to be given free rein, implicit in the natural tendency to be *wei wo* and to *zong yu*, that they can enlarge and spread their inherent compassion and therefore that a humane polity can be established. Even though Kang does not explicitly refer to Yang Zhu, Yang Zhu is undeniably present through his choice of vocabulary. Kang not only establishes a strong connection between *wei wo* and *zong yu*, but also perceives them as key elements of the attainment of the Great Unity.

Conclusion

Yang Zhu had long been employed rhetorically instead of being studied seriously as a pre-Qin master with his own teachings in pre-modern China. The short expression *wei wo* that Mencius attributed to Yang Zhu had a great effect on how scholars of later generations perceived Yang Zhu. However, a reconstruction of Yang Zhu's theory only seems to have begun with the late Qing intellectual Kang Youwei. Kang relied on the *Liezi* to solidify Yang Zhu as an ancient master who had a coherent theory. In this process, Kang shifted the focus away from the age-old Yang-Mo trope and to a Lao-Yang lineage; the expressions *wei wo* and *zong yu* were attributed to Yang Zhu as his core ideas. Whether or not explicitly related to Yang Zhu, they were seen by Kang as deeply intertwined. However, Kang remained ambiguous in his views of these two notions: when they were explicitly associated with Yang Zhu, they were the doctrines that weakened China; when they were not explicitly associated with Yang Zhu, they were the key elements to achieve the Great Unity. So far, this ambiguity seems unresolvable. Possible explanations for it might be that Kang was not aware of the ambiguity himself; or that he was aware of it, but decided not to acknowledge it and so left Yang Zhu out of the positive vision. Despite the ambiguity, Kang's choice of words still had an impact on the portrayals of Yang Zhu that followed his. Kang's depiction of Yang Zhu turned this master into someone highly relevant to modern China. It also showed the possibility of reading the notions of *wei wo* and *zong yu* in a positive light, and this had implications for new, positive interpretations of Yang Zhu. Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), for instance, subsequently contended that Yang Zhu was an early Chinese philosopher of rights whose theory was beneficial to strengthening China.²⁶

26 More about Liang's portrayal of Yang Zhu can be seen in Wang Xiaowei (2022).

Despite this ambiguity, Kang's reconstruction of Yang Zhu undeniably made Yang Zhu more relevant to modern Chinese discourse. With Kang's emphasis on the *Liezi*, later intellectuals and scholars also started to pay attention to the *Liezi* and debated the authenticity of the text as well as the possibility of finding Yang Zhu's ideas in this text. Despite Kang's reading of Yang Zhu's *zong yu* not having been followed by many, the trend of associating Yang Zhu with a general sense of hedonism can be seen in the writings of later Chinese intellectuals. For instance, although Liang was able to offer a positive reading of Yang Zhu, he still claimed that Yang Zhu's theory was "nothing more than ego-centrism and hedonism 除為我主義，縱樂主義，更無所可事" (Liang 1999, 573). Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) also considers the "Yang Zhu" chapter in the *Liezi* to be a text that exhibits hedonistic ideas.²⁷ However, the May Fourth intellectual Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) defends a reading of Yang Zhu's theory as characterized by pessimism.²⁸ The leader of the Doubting Antiquity School Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) emphasizes instead a very positive reading of Yang Zhu's idea of keeping human nature intact rather than satisfying bodily desires. Even in contemporary scholarship, whether Yang Zhu held a theory of hedonism is still in debate (Brindley 2022). Thus, these debates over how to interpret Yang Zhu's teachings, both what they were and what they mean for us, are all children of Kang Youwei's original move to read and evaluate Yang Zhu as a master in his own right.

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27 When Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao discuss Yang Zhu, they base their reading of Yang Zhu on the "Yang Zhu" chapter. See Kang (2007h, vol. 3, 40–41); see also Liang (1999, 573–74). Although Feng Youlan does not believe that the "Yang Zhu" chapter represents Yang Zhu's philosophy, he still reads the "Yang Zhu" chapter in terms of its hedonistic ideas. See Feng Youlan (2001, vol. 2, 109–117).

28 For those who defended Yang Zhu, see Hu Shi (2003, vol. 5, 349–50). See also Feng (2001, vol. 2, 373–76.)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Masayuki TANIMOTO and R. Bin WONG, editors:

Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe.

*Reviewed by Jiarui WU**

(2019. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, pp. 331. ISBN 978-0520-30365-2.)

Previous studies regarding the emergence and development of social systems have often been based on the study of European nations, which largely ignores the fact that other nations also underwent the process in patterns that are either similar or strikingly different from the European one. Contemporary researchers have identified this flaw and thus sought to address it by studying the emergence and development of social systems in non-European nations rather than assuming that the European model is the standard. It is in line with this new school of thought that Bin Wong and Masayuki Tanimoto explore social development in Japan and compare it with Europe. In their book *Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe*, the authors provide readers with a general overview of the systems for public goods provision in early modern Japan, while also offering comparison examples from Europe, primarily from Prussia.

Throughout history, communities have relied on market transactions, obtaining goods and services in various ways to achieve economic growth. The authors define public goods as those that can only be obtained in a “non-market” context. The provision of public goods, a process through which people can access goods and services without necessitating market transactions or personal provision courtesy of personal relationships, is a complex process that is subject to differing motivations and micropolitics. An analysis of public goods provision systems allows the reader to understand the workings of the early political-social spaces, including the development and functioning of early governments and related social entities (2). Many

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studies often focus on Western nations' economic development and supremacy without paying much attention to the provision of public goods. Occasionally, the subject might be highlighted by authors as part of the analysis of how public funds are used, but this information is rarely linked to how the said expenditures affected the related economies. Wong and Tanimoto note the case of Britain, whose national economy and fiscal state were focused on the establishment of a naval force, which enabled the nation to extend its political reach and transact trade across the globe. As a result, studies on Britain's economy often focus on the political and economic factors surrounding the establishment and benefits of the British navy to the exclusion of other public goods during the same period.

The authors, however, provide alternative models that have been used in the Oriental. For example, in contrast to Britain, Japan provides an excellent example of nonmilitary public goods provision. The country is also an excellent case study as it has well-documented details of its societal structure and various aspects of administration, including taxation, provision of poor relief, infrastructure, and forest management (6). Japanese villages emerged as largely self-governing entities with a significant level of administrative autonomy, which allowed the villagers to make collective decisions to the demands arising from their own needs and those placed on them by the ruling class. The villages administrative autonomy expanded to form social spaces beyond the villages themselves, referred to as *Gunchū*. Buoyed by a "rural economy based on agriculture and proto-industry, wealthy farmers" became notable persons in their respective areas and undertook the job of public goods provision (7). In Prussia's case, it is notable that individuals depend on their personal relationships with the ruling lords for the provision of public goods. The public social space emerged out of this relationship and gradually enlarged as the population grew in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, peaking after German unification in 1871.

The authors explore the various problems and opportunities that rulers and subjects in these early communities faced, and how the public goods provision infrastructure they came up with formed the background for modern societies. They look at how early modern economy public goods provision models have affected the diversity of public goods provision in contemporary times. In part 1 of the book, "Public Finance and Regional Society in Early Modern Japan", the authors trace the origins of the Japanese public goods provision system. The Age of Civil Wars (sixteenth century) saw the rise of local lords who possessed economic and military power (13). The Tokugawa family emerged at the top after the battle at Sekigahara (1600), and established their rule over the Japanese archipelago. The government they established in 1603, known as the Tokugawa shogunate, ruled until 1868, for 250 years. The Tokugawa shogunate exercised powers similar to

a central government, with rights over diplomacy, coinage, and foreign trade. It also held the authority to give other lords the mandate to rule over their respective jurisdictions. These lords, in turn, enjoyed the autonomy to manage their revenues and expenditures.

The lords and other members of the ruling class, including the samurai, resided in caste towns like Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, while the rest of the population, mostly peasants, lived and worked in rural agricultural villages. These peasants paid land levies (*nengu*) to the lords in the form of bags of rice levied on individual households. The amount of levies imposed was based on the annual production per area. Although the levy system was imposed on families, each village had to ensure that the full levy imposed on the village as a whole was paid, and thus acted as the primary collection point. In this way, villages evolved to gain autonomy as governing units allowing for the rise of village notables (also from the peasant class) who took up the mandate of providing public goods to the village. This form of infrastructural organization highlights the essential role that the citizenry took in providing and maintaining public goods in this era in Japan.

The agency of the citizenry in providing public goods for itself is also observable from the actions of the village notables who diverted surplus funds from the excess held by the lords to the public domain. On the other hand, the ruling class gained wealth by trading the surplus from selling the land levy, typically paid in goods rather than cash. The money received from the sales allowed the ruling class to maintain their living standards and afford luxuries. The system allowed the rulers of early modern Japan to rule without having to supply the public goods provided by local village notables from the peasant class. Lords frequently outsourced financial management to local notables, who reduced the expenses in the lords households and diverted the surplus money to provide public goods that benefited their villages. By instituting changes that reduced the lords spending, such as limiting the shopping undertaken by the lord's family, advocating for a shift to cheaper houses, and less extravagant parties, the local notables in charge of the lords' finances could create Internal Reserved Funds that could then be used to pay debts and to fund public goods and projects.

Despite the provision of projects enjoyed by the citizenry, a key feature in providing public goods is that the system was set up to primarily benefit the ruling class. Records from the Tokugawa shogunate era show that part of the monies gained from the levies was used to provide public goods, including the construction of civil engineering projects, repairing castles, and building temples and shrines for famine relief. The shogunate would also provide loans to poor areas affected by poor harvests. As part of the Kansei Reforms, the shogunate ordered that villages

should have adequate granaries to counter the effects of poor harvests. However, the shogunate's public goods provision systems, including water provision, should not be viewed as wholly benevolent. Although the public benefited from the establishment of these systems, and they set a basis for the provision of public goods by modern-day governments, the shogunate's aim in providing these was primarily to establish stable and consistent payments of the levies used to support the military.

The authors provide a comparison of how the nations handled various public goods and how the provision of infrastructure was linked to the relationships among the social classes. The success of various nations' public goods provision infrastructures can be observed in how they handled poverty and famine relief. England had the Old Poor Law, Prussia Conservation, and China "ever-normal granaries", while Japan left the matter to the local notables. Some similarities and differences between the various systems existed. For example, like England, Japan relied on local parishes to operate its relief services. However, there was no established poor relief system in Japan at the state level (76). That role once again fell on the local notables at the village level, who had to identify the people deserving of relief and saw to its provision. However, the provision of relief was underpinned by micropolitics, and society did not hesitate to shame those considered a burden to their communities.

The most remarkable similarity between England and Japan's relief provision was the prejudice seen in selecting who could be considered deserving or undeserving of receiving relief. Additionally, both were notorious for the shaming of the recipients. In Japan, those who received funds would be shamed and considered burdens on society. The case was similar in England, where those receiving relief were forced to wear badges that identified them to the community (92). This is strikingly different from the Prussian case, where the lords holding "upper ownership" accepted responsibility (*Konservation*) over their subjects' welfare under demesne lordship (*Gutsherrschaft*). Under this relationship, Prussian lords provided their subjects with "farm equipment, livestock, seeds, and buildings when they first leased their farms to tenants, and, in some cases, even beds and kitchen utensils were prepared".

Additionally, lords were expected to provide timber to construct and repair their tenants' houses in cases where the tenants did not hold lower lordship. *Konservation* was an obligation of the lord to the tenants rather than a favour. However, the tenant also was responsible for taking care of and maintaining the seeds, farm equipment, and livestock. In the case of severe and unavoidable challenges, they could receive help from the lord, but were expected to perform their duties adequately and without aid for the most part. A tenant who was judged incompetent could be evicted from the farm or demoted to a lodger even if he held lower land

ownership. However, as the number of lodgers increased in the eighteenth century, the burden of the provision of public goods was shifted from the lords to the village. The shift elicited a similar reaction to that in England and Japan, where villagers were irritated at having to support people they considered a burden to society. However, unlike in England and Japan, Prussian villagers did not shame the people receiving relief by naming them or forcing them to wear badges. In this way, the Prussian micropolitics differed from that seen in England and Japan.

China's case is even more different from that of England, Japan and Prussia. In China, the provision and receiving of alms carried no stigma at all. Those who needed relief received it from the locally established "community granaries" that were part of the nationwide granary system (93). The "ever-normal granaries" were a standard part of the Chinese government's efforts to stabilize grain prices. They also helped provide relief to the poor by lending grain or selling it at reduced prices. The lack of stigma in this case stems from the fact that the Chinese granary system benefited everyone, not just those in need.

The handling of forests also provides additional insight into the handling of non-market products in the different nations. The importance of forests was acknowledged in all the societies examined in the book. In Prussia, forestry was regulated by growing swathes of fast-growing coniferous trees to meet the demands of the peasantry. The move gave the peasantry free access to these trees for domestic use, though not for sale. On the other hand, early modern China left control of forestry resources mainly in private hands, although here were government zones that catered for non-market needs. These zones were excluded from private ownership, being left for the poor. As noted earlier, the Prussian model required the lord to provide his subjects with timber and other forest resources for domestic use. In Japan, managing the forest was left to each village through the local notables.

The book makes a very interesting read with its detailed analysis of the histories of four nations, England, Prussia, Japan, and China. It effectively offers a basis for comparing the approach toward providing public goods in Eastern and Western nations. The book highlights numerous differences and similarities that help the reader better understand how early governments in these nations operated, and their motivations. Through the book, the reader can see how micropolitics in each area shaped the provision of public goods and how their provision affected the development of that particular society. Although military power and avoiding unrest were the primary motivators for the ruling class to provide public goods in early economies, the systems established in the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continue to shape attitudes towards the provision of public goods in both Western and Eastern nations.

Muhammad U. FARUQUE:

Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood and Human Flourishing

*Reviewed by Anthony F. SHAKER**

(2021. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, pp. xv + 311. 978-0472132621.)

The subject of the self has been around, arguably, since people first began to systematize their thinking about the world and themselves, though it has never been studied as systematically as in the last fourteen centuries. That is to say, after the foundations of institutional learning and scientific investigation had been laid in the Islamicate world, more or less in the form we take for granted today. In this thoughtful and deeply knowledgeable study, Prof. Muhammad U. Faruque turns his attention to a set of themes at a moment of “major crisis” for the “theories of selfhood and subjectivity”. The crisis he has in mind is conceptual in nature and attributable to the myriad technological innovations that have overturned virtually every claim about selfhood inspired by neuroscience, Analytic Philosophy, phenomenology, anthropology and religious studies (1). Nor has there been a shortage of “scientifically” inspired writers posing big questions about matters which cannot be determined within the boundaries of any empirical discipline—a mismatch of competences that recalls the one for which the great physician Rāzī had sharply censured Galen’s speculative claims about the nature of soul.¹

Specialists and laypersons will profit immensely from Faruque’s deft analyses, which he executes in the more consistent light of the Islamicate tradition—and to some extent the Indian and Chinese. Thanks to the impressive array of evidence he marshals, he is also able to stake out some interesting positions of his own. This combination of philosophical reflection and erudition in the classical texts is exceedingly hard to find among academics.

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1 Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā’ Rāzī, *Al-Shukūk ‘alā Jalīnūs* (Tehran, Iran: Silsileh Intishārāt-e Anjuman-e Athār va Maḥākhir-e Farhangī), 2006.



Faruque modestly describes this brilliant study—his doctoral dissertation thoroughly reworked and enriched with further research and conversations with academic peers—as “an exercise in cross-cultural philosophy and philosophy of religion [...] by constantly drawing on parallels or allowing critical conversations between Islamic and non-Islamic (also, Western) philosophers” (9). The “parallels” observable across cultural spheres have lost a great deal of their novelty over the decades, being as common to scholars today as seatbelts in cars. Therefore, it is refreshing to see how Faruque uses his judiciously focused comparisons to decipher the many contradictory statements that have been made about the self. Perhaps his late initiation into philosophy accounts for the freshness he brings with him into this thicket. Before traveling abroad to study *Hikma*² and logic under authoritative teachers, he began as a finance economics student at the University of London. His main complaint at the time, he tells us in the Preface, was this: Without “human subjectivity” and “subjective factors”, how is one to “understand and predict what happens in the external world” (xi)? Incidentally, he sometimes throws loaded expressions like “subjectivity” around, only to make the necessary adjustment later in compensation for their shortcomings.

That earlier experience led to a recognition that understanding our *selves* is “one of the most challenging of all questions”. That this kind of knowledge is unattainable through “empirical research alone” today means to him, most tellingly, that “there are no scientific *facts* which can help us determine decisively whether our selves constitute parts of our bodies, or are incorporeal substances which somehow relate to our bodies, or are epiphenomena of our brains” (1–2).

Consequently, he sees only two possible options: one may either reject the notion of self altogether or try to “salvage” it in a way that allows for a resolution of sorts to the “apparent contradictions” (2). Opting for the second option, he has had to temper his expectation of “resolution”. In fact, it cannot be otherwise. Settling every core question with absolute finality would be infeasible. Imagine all the big questions posed by humanity finally “resolved” to everyone’s satisfaction. Isn’t such a finality part of what the mainstream religious traditions, particularly the Islamic, mean by the Hereafter? What could possibly remain after all has been decided? What is more important, then, a forlorn hope or knowing how to pose questions and why they are posed? Nowadays, we ask questions either because we can or because we have a greater desire to get at some truth “out there” than to continue the dialogue or to learn more. Such a short span of attention was once a mark of dilettantism.

2 ^{‘Hikma’} refers to the Islamicate tradition of philosophy, not to wisdom, which also renders the word *‘hikma’*.

In the dialogue he develops for contemporary thought, Hikma and the philosophical traditions farther east, Faruque is careful to pose questions in the manner of their authors or, when they are his, with a view to what logically follows. He has no trouble embracing the logic and jargon of other authors for the sake of the argument—sometimes exasperatingly—but he always seems to land on his feet. Far from pretending to decide the big questions concerning the self on his own, he insists that the proper response to the conflicting views “lies in recognizing that [the self] is a ‘spectrum’ concept” (3), being “multidimensional [...] much like the electromagnetic spectrum with different wavelengths of light”. In fact, what he seeks to resolve are *methodological* issues (ibid.), in the main, not how to collapse everything into some abstract fiction of the self based on a handful of general comparisons.

To that end, he distinguishes two aspects of self, descriptive and normative, which of course do not imply two selves. What he calls the descriptive self, which is analysable into its bio-physiological, socio-cultural and cognito-experiential dimensions, is that which the human mind represents when it is focused on an object “self” (197). The normative self, on the other hand, pertains to the ethical and spiritual. It refers to that self in which knowing anything has to be grounded and in connection to which he examines what others have been saying about “awareness”, “self-awareness” and the “I”. He cites everyone from Yaḥyā Suhrawardī and Ibn Sīnā to Shāh Walī Allāh and Muḥammad Iqbal (the latter two forming a good part of his discussion), Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others.

In my opinion, his list is a little inflated with faddish sources like Sartre, Buber, Wittgenstein, and the like, not to mention dabblers in the philosophy of this or that science (e.g., Thomas Metzinger), whom practicing scientists generally ignore. On the other hand, I confess that before reading the book I had trouble taking Walī Allāh’s ideas seriously. Despite Walī Allāh’s well-known shiftiness and modernisms and Iqbal’s own imitative superficiality, Faruque manages to extract a few suggestive ideas from their writings. Hoping “to settle the terminological debate over the word ‘self’ in Walī Allāh’s works at the outset”, in particular, he gathers all the instances where the latter uses “self” (*nafs*) or tries to explain it with cognitive equivalents (52). The list of terms he comes up with is so varied that it does indeed indicate, as he says, how “the common connotations of these terms belong to the same spectrum concept understood as ‘self’” (53). However, he calls into question Walī Allāh’s unusual identification of “*rūḥ*” (spirit) with “*nafs*” (self) (55), though it was rendered as the “fine air” (*nasī-i ṭayyib*) “that percolates through the body or the angelic spirit”. Walī Allāh’s understanding of “*rūḥ*” and “*nafs*” suggests something more literal than what the philosophical discourse can tolerate, and his attempt at concretizing these terms has to be taken with a big grain of salt.

Besides Walī Allāh, Faruque considers more recent efforts by some academics to adapt the concept of “*nafs*” found in Sufism and Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings to psychoanalysis. Here again he leaps to our rescue by noting that, with respect to one familiar passage on “*al-nafs al-ammāra*”, Ibn ‘Arabī “is not discussing psychology” (57) but “elaborating on human knowledge in relation to the divine” (ibid.). This is about the best advice one could give to the reader about “awareness” and “self-awareness” and their significance to philosophy – not to psychology or any other discipline.

Faruque devotes much space to “self-awareness”, particularly in connection with Suhraṣardī and Kant, both of whom recognized that “self-awareness” and “spirit” pointed to something higher in human knowledge than either the bare elements that make up a given object known (e.g., self) or the elements that make up the knowing subject’s own consciousness. It is obvious that the real dynamic that comes to the fore is that between what is deemed unconditional and what material. Both are so crucial to formalized thinking that without them the nitty-gritty of any human insight into anything whatsoever could never be expressed or discussed. He rightly places the onus of philosophical inquiry into the self intermediately between knowing and existing, where it belongs and where it began for the Presocratics, the classical thinkers on the Indian subcontinent, and the Ḥukamā. It is the extremities of absolute knowing and absolute existence that are normally denied man, not his journey between them. Without the middle, everything would have to appear either subjectively and thus unknowable, or objectively and equally unknowable.

It is hard to do justice to Faruque’s treatment of “self-knowledge” and “self-knowledge as abiding presence”. What is constant in every context of his discussion is that one “cannot establish foundational self-knowledge through introspection in order to resolve the paradox of self-knowledge” (69)—that is to say, introspective knowledge of one’s own self as a mere representation, since every conceivable kind of representation automatically turns the self into something other than what it is in itself. Suhraṣardī advanced several arguments along these lines, as did Ibn ‘Arabī. Apart from negative terms like “non-reflective knowledge” and “non-objectifying” (70), though, Faruque never definitively states what “higher” thing establishes such a foundation and to which self-knowledge and -awareness are said to point. But for good reason, I believe: it involves more than one consideration or level of “highness” and “hiddenness”, and probably another volume to explain. On this subject, few philosophers are more complicated than Mullā Ṣadrā and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī. So, Faruque’s quotation from Ṣadrā establishes the logical parameters at least with respect to perception: namely that “all perceptual acts presuppose a prior self-knowledge”, that “humans’ self-knowledge and their selves precede all other knowledge, and that [self-knowledge] is always present to them without a break” (75).

Faruque also opens his discussion to physiology according to great medical minds like Ḥunayn b. Iṣḥāq, Galen and Ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī. From the outset, the ancient Greek medical thinkers were falling out with each other over how to explain the specialization of the body's *many* parts relative to the organism's *single* nature,³ how the *pneuma* contributed to the formation of life, and where to draw the line between philosophy and medicine. The *pneuma* has a bearing on Faruque's overall discussion, because it has to do with spirit and thus with what is higher.

Apart from the troublesome term “foundational” and some translated block quotations that could perhaps be improved upon, I have noticed nothing untoward either in the contents or conclusions. However, I do take issue with his classification of “self” as descriptive and normative. Classifying it and its knowledge according to these two definite types might mislead one into seeing a resemblance with Wilfrid Sellars's *normative* “manifest self-image” and “the scientific image of man”, which add up to little more than a philosophy of the everyday, this being roughly the level at which Sellars otherwise chose to “define” philosophy. But this does not appear to be Faruque's intent.

Finally, I am not sure why he feels it so necessary to bind the spiritual and self-knowledge to the normative. He sees this even in Ṣadrā, who he says “places unusual emphasis on the ethics and spirituality of self-knowledge” (205). Nothing in the method of philosophy prevents philosophers from discussing anything at all in the world. On the contrary, they are able to observe and philosophize about everything related to human beings and their world without having to operate in any but philosophy's own field of inquiry. So, why single out the ethical and the moral as the touchstone of spirit, instead of in the terms of what is normally understood as the *unconditional* necessary for thinking, in contradistinction with matter or whatever is delimitable? The German Idealists and later Dilthey referred to man's cultural productions and artifacts as belonging to the “*Geist*”; yet, there is nothing specifically uplifting, spiritual or moral about a fashionable dress or a table, except perhaps in the eye of the beholder.

The modern mindset has a rather peculiar penchant for moralizing and literalism. Attaching too much importance to ethics, therefore, seems not just anachronistic when discussing past philosophers, but also a minefield in itself. Faruque's regular use of “normative”, “ethical” and “moral” may be acceptable for the sake of argument, but not after we cross into philosophy proper. One cannot overlook

3 There are few studies on philosophy and medical tradition's collaborative effort to “explain” the formation of the body's parts from a single factor like nature. But it was crucial to philosophy, because logically the many could not be derived from one. On that relationship between philosophy and medicine since ancient times, see Anthony F. Shaker, *Reintroducing Philosophy: Thinking as the Gathering of Civilization* (2020, 365–416).

how every world tradition's interest in the ethical aspect of life began to fuse with the utopianism of the French Enlightenment, and how frequently the fixation on moralism since then has degenerated into unbridled propaganda and tribalism.

This book is an outstanding introduction to the complex issues that flow from the subject of "selfhood". But it also reveals just how erratic the modern debate has been and how flimsy its many claims about the nature of our humanity are. If anything, that alone is an invitation to readers to deepen their understanding of our common cultural inheritance.

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Shaker, Anthony F. 2020. *Reintroducing Philosophy: Thinking as the Gathering of Civilization*. Wilmington: Vernon Press.