Introduction: Perspectives on Chinese, Buddhist, and Environmental Philosophy

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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.\footnote{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).}

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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
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 稽康. 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*) 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 interlinked 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.

References


