

# THE ECOLOGY OF HOME

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Transformations in  
Environment and Society

2017 / 3

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This issue: [doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8018](https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8018)

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*This article started life as the draft for a keynote speech given at the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences held in Jinan on 23 August 2015. I would like to thank Professor Donald Worster and Shen Hou for their suggestions and criticism. I am especially grateful to Shen Hou who edited and revised the English version of the article in a substantial way. Professor Xiaoxu Xu and Doctor Agnes Kneitz at Renmin University of China helped me sort out the relationship between Haeckel's coinage of the term ecology and its ancient Greek origin. Editors from the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society not only greatly improved and polished my writing, but also offered many valuable suggestions for revision. I would like to give my sincere thanks to all of them. I am responsible for any possible errors in the article.*

Xia Mingfang

## A New Revolution in Historical Research for the Twenty-First Century

The era we live in has witnessed the most exciting revolution for people in the vast land of China. In just over a few decades, this revolution has spread rapidly and in a unique way, rivaling the changes that have occurred in Western countries over three or four hundred years. I have studied these changes as a historian and also experienced them in my own life. I was born and grew up in the newly founded People's Republic of China; I spent my whole childhood with a massive "class revolution" going on nationwide, and as a young adult I experienced China as it started to undergo an overwhelming period of reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping, which aimed to promote the commodity economy and the market economy. The dramatic changes that these reforms brought about gave me, a man from a humble rural family, the opportunity to get out of the countryside and work my way into the cities.

Since the end of the last century, environmentalism has quietly emerged and grown in China in various forms. This has not only effected changes in people's thinking and behaviors, but has also become the most essential part of China's national development strategy. The Chinese people, who once despised the rural life, are now getting increasingly nostalgic for it, as evidenced by a growing trend among city dwellers to embrace the "back-to-the-land" or "back-to-nature" movement, just as urban residents in the United States and developed European countries do. A large number of related concepts have emerged, and on such a massive scale, that we often come across them in our daily lives: concepts like eco-economy, eco-finance, eco-tourism, eco-city/county/village, eco-chicken, eco-fish, and even eco-humans. These fall under a higher and more comprehensive concept, "ecological civilization." Like many other ecological concepts, such as the "Anthropocene," the term was not coined within China, but originated in Europe and America. Yet unlike "Anthropocene," which is only known to a small circle of scholars, the concept of ecological civilization was introduced to China much earlier, gradually gaining popularity nationwide and catching the attention of the Chinese Communist Party government. Eventually, in 2012, it was written into a government report as one of the key terms of the country's development plan. If the Anthropocene indicates humanity's mastery of as well as damage to the world, then the Chinese incarnation of ecological civilization describes a beautiful dream of an ancient country that is striving to go beyond modernization and rebuild

nature at the same time that it is forging a highly industrialized nation.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, human beings have entered a new era of ecological revolution.

In response to our extraordinary times, our understanding of history has also undergone unprecedented changes. To be sure, the study of the relationship between humans and nature in Chinese historiography can be traced back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–228 CE) around two thousand years ago, when Sima Qian and Ban Gu both explored the interrelation between the two entities and showed how natural changes were closely linked with dynastic politics. In their works, they not only recorded many natural calamities and abnormal phenomena, as well as their social consequences, but also regarded these natural events, such as earthquakes and droughts, as heaven's punishment of the secular rulers' moral flaws, or as signs of the loss of a certain dynasty's legitimacy. This is what Sima Qian called "exploring the dialogue between nature and humans." However, according to Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of the most influential modern Chinese thinkers, such historiography was nothing but the history of the emperors, generals, and ministers and therefore should be replaced with a new way of studying history. Based on its interpretation of social Darwinism, this new history separated humans from nature. Consequently, history has become the pure research of the history of "human groups," while nature has been designated as falling under the purview of geography, which focuses on space.<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, it is scholars from geography, mainly from historical geography, such as Zhu Kezhen, Tan Qixiang, Hou Renzhi, Shi Nianhai, and Wen Huanran, who have undertaken the task of studying the relationship between nature and human beings in Chinese history. They have produced important works on the historical transformation of Chinese climate, vegetation, and landforms.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 The concept of ecological civilization was first elaborated systematically at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. It has been incorporated into the national development plan as a guideline for action, and the ecological goals it embodies are equally important as the economic, political, social, and cultural goals of China. These five goals are collectively known as the five pillars of progress and constitute the overall arrangement of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Although it seems as if "ecology" only deals with the relationship between humans and nature, it is actually related to all the other four aspects and to China's national strategy to realize green development. In this context, therefore, it has richer meanings than the definition of ecology in a narrow sense.
- 2 Liang Qichao 梁启超, "Xin shixue" 新史学 ["New History"], in vol. 9 of *Yinbingshi heji, wenji* 饮冰室合集, 文集 [The Collection of Yinbingshi, Essays] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Press], 1989).
- 3 From the 1920s, Zhu Kezhen started publishing a series of articles investigating climatic changes in ancient China and their social effects. He also revealed the complex causation of the formation of floods in northern China from the perspective of demographic growth, agricultural development, and environmental transformation. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, this sort of research has been carried forward among historical geographers; their most important work is concentrated in a master volume, Zhu Kezhen 竺可桢, ed., *Zhongguo ziran dili: lishi ziran dili* 中国自然地理: 历史自然地理 [Chinese Natural Geography: Historical Natural Geography] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe [Science Press], 1982), which was launched as a group project in 1978 and completed in 1980. Zhu Kezhen was the chief editor of the book and many other leading historical geographers, including Tan Qixiang and Shi Nianhai, participated in its writing.

After the introduction of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, Professor Li Wenhai at Renmin University, a champion of the history of disasters, came up with a proposition to re-interpret a series of critical events in China in the modern era by studying the connection and interaction between natural and social phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Due to his efforts, nature is once again becoming integrated with the history of society, which once only studied changing relationships among humans. Professor Hou Wenhui at Qingdao University, who used to work at Lanzhou University, has made a major contribution to the environmental history of China by translating a large number of influential American works on this subject. Along with this, she also introduced the concepts and methodology of environmental history to Chinese scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Today, environmental history has become the most dynamic area of historiography on the Chinese mainland due to the efforts of a group of young researchers since the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup> The academic community is increasingly realizing that environmental history that focuses on the interrelationship between humans and nature not only constitutes an important branch of historiography, but also offers a valuable new perspective and approach with which to observe Chinese history. And it will ultimately facilitate a major change in China's historiography. Humans and nature, time and space, which were separated over one hundred years ago, have been once again united, ushering in nothing short of a new revolution in Chinese historical research.<sup>7</sup>

- 4 Since the mid-1980s, Prof. Li Wenhai, the vice president of the Chinese Historical Society, established "the research team of the history of modern Chinese disasters" in the department of history at Renmin University of China. Along with the other team members, he edited *A Chronological History of Disasters and Famines in Modern China* (published in two volumes) and organized many symposiums, seminars, and conferences discussing the connection between disasters and major historical events in modern China, such as the Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion, the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894, and the social movement that led to the Boxer Rebellion. See Li Wenhai et al. 李文海等, *Jindai zhongguo zaihuang jinian* 近代中国灾荒纪年 [A Chronological History of Disasters and Famines in Modern China]. (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe [Hunan Education Press], 1990); *Jindai zhongguo zaihuang jinian xubian, 1919-1949* [The Chronicles of Modern China 1919-1949] (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe [Hunan Education Press], 1993). His article, entitled "Qingmo zaihuang yu xin hai geming" 清末灾荒与辛亥革命 [The Disasters and Famines at the End of the Qing Dynasty and the 1911 Republican Revolution], *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 [Journal of Historical Studies] 5 (1991), could be seen as a seminal work in this field.
- 5 Prof. Hou Wenhui was introduced to the field of American environmental history in the mid-1980s. She has translated many important works in the field and related fields, including *Nature's Economy and Dust Bowl* by Donald Worster, *Wilderness and the American Mind* by Roderick Nash, *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, and *The Closing Circle* by Barry Commoner (see works cited for publication details). She also authored *Zhengfu shidai de wange: meiguo huanjing yishi de bianqian* 征服时代的挽歌: 美国环境意识的变迁 [The Elegy for the Age of Conquest: The Transformation of American Environmental Awareness] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe [Oriental Press], 1995), which was the first Chinese monograph studying foreign environmental history.
- 6 Bao Maohong, "Environmental History in China," *Environment and History* 10, no. 4, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue (November 2004): 475-99, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3197/0967340042772630>.
- 7 Xia Mingfang 夏明方, "Lishi de shengtaixue jieshi: 21 shiji zhongguo shixue de xin geming" 历史的生态学解释: 21 世纪中国史学的新革命 [An Ecological Interpretation of History: The New Revolution for the Historical Studies in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China], in vol. 6 of *Xin shixue* 新史学 [New History], ed. Xia Mingfang 夏明方, 1-43 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Press], 2012).

This new revolution is no doubt part of the Chinese and even the wider global ecological revolution, and it will make its own contributions by rethinking Chinese history and using this perspective to offer insightful reflections on current environmental problems and ecological crises.

### **Ecological History: Studying the Compound “Home” of Humans and Nature**

But what do we mean when we talk about ecology and the environment? And how does the distinction between the two matter for our work as historians? Among Chinese academics, this is still a matter of much debate. It is significant that, in May 2012, when Renmin University of China set up a new research institute, it was named the “Center for *Ecological History*”—not *environmental* history, as the field is generally called in English-language contexts. Some guests, especially those who came from across China, had different opinions about the name of the center and suggested that it should be changed to the “Center for Environmental History.” However, by framing the human/nature relationship differently, the term “ecological” makes it possible to adopt a new way of thinking about our place in the world that avoids some of the pitfalls of the term “environmental” and will be valuable for tackling the global problems we are currently facing.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the ecosystem generally refers to a complex composed of nonhuman organisms and their environment, which together constitute the “environment” that is external to humans. What environmental history studies is the relationship between humans and their environment or what is sometimes also called their “ecology” (shengtai, 生态),<sup>8</sup> as well as the changing processes between them; therefore, humans and their ecosystem are separated. But what we must always strive for is to treat human beings and their environment as one organism. Humans live in the same system with other organisms and nonliving entities. They all are part of a higher level of ecosystem composed of humans and nature. Some scholars use the concept of a “human ecosystem,” which usually refers to a kind of “interacting interface between humans and nature,” but this phrase fails to include the so-called

8 “Ecology” here is used in the sense common in everyday usage and in environmental history (particularly in a Chinese context), i.e., as referring to humans’ surroundings or external environment. This is distinct from the sense proposed later in this section as part of an argument for studying humans and their environments as intrinsically connected and part of the same system.

pure natural system and the social system that exist beyond this interface. As a result, what environmental history studies is just a certain part of the overall human-nature system. In our view, however, the so-called natural system, the social system, and the overarching complex system are inseparable from the interaction between humans and nature, and all are subsystems of the whole—the only difference lies in their different functions within the overarching system. This overarching system, comprising humans, nonhuman organisms, and nonliving entities, could also be described as “ecology” in a more expansive sense of the word.

Western academics have not typically made a significant distinction between ecological history and environmental history. It is not unusual to find the two concepts used interchangeably in the same work. Yet it is still useful to define and clarify the implications and the boundaries of the two concepts. As suggested by US environmental historian Jason W. Moore, Cartesian dualism emerging in the seventeenth century saw nature and society in two distinct, separated boxes.<sup>9</sup> Environmental history, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, aims to rise above such dualism and understand the nature-society relationship in a nuanced way. At first, the idea that nature has an independent existence free from any human impact was overemphasized as scholars attempted to correct the historical approaches of the past, which had focused purely on humans. By the early 1990s, environments typically considered human artifacts, such as cities, also came to be regarded as possible subjects of environmental history. But from the point of view of postmodern history, this type of “nature” is only an artificial creation—and even the so-called pristine “wilderness” is nothing but a kind of “unnatural nature” and the product of human activities such as urbanization. People can’t help but ask: What in fact is nature? Where does nature go?

Strangely enough, however, the same researchers who argued that manmade environments are also a form of nature never totally denied the existence of an “authentic” nature. William Cronon, an influential figure in US constructivist environmental history, holds that all our ways of thinking about the natural world are forcefully shaped by the times, places, and cultures we live in. On the other hand, he also believes that the wind, the sky, trees, birds, and rocks are, first and foremost, just themselves. “We

9 Jason W. Moore, “Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Our Times: Accumulation & Crisis in the Capitalist World-Ecology,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 17, no. 1 (2011): 108–47, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2011.432>.

may,” says Cronon, “move around and impose our designs upon them. We may do our best to make them bend to our wills. But in the end they remain inscrutable, artifacts of a world we did not make whose meaning for themselves we can never finally know. Acknowledging their autonomy and otherness does not spare us the task of trying to make human sense of what they seem to tell us. . . . But if we listen closely, we human beings can learn a great deal from the tales we tell of such a place. This silent rock, this nature about which we argue so much, is also among the most important things we have in common.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, some continue to see the relationship between humans and nature as the relationship between society and “ecology” in the everyday sense (see note 8). This appears to contradict the argument commonly made in environmental history that humans are also part of nature.

As modern environmentalist movements were first emerging in the West, the prominent French scholar Serge Moscovici voiced sharp criticism of the concept of an environment that is irrelevant to humans. He compared it to an iron cage and advocated an “ecological logic” or “ecologism” that emphasizes the coexistence of humans and nature. His effort led to an influential ecological movement.<sup>11</sup> Four decades later, drawing on the Greek philosopher and botanist Theophrastus, whose concept of the “*oikeios topos*” refers to the relationship between a plant species and the environment, Jason W. Moore suggested the term “*oikeios*” as a way to redefine “ecology” to encompass both humans and nature.<sup>12</sup> All is natural, all is societal. Nature and society may exist independently as abstract categories, but in the real world, it is impossible to separate the two. Both are the result of human-nature interaction and therefore both are kinds of ecology. In this sense, what really matters is not a separate nature or society, but the ever-present and ever-changing interrelation between the two.

To be sure, works on environmental history do frequently focus on this interrelationship. But using the term ecology avoids the sort of confusion about concepts that

10 William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. & Company, 1996), 55–56.

11 Serge Moscovici 塞尔日 莫斯科维奇, *Huan ziran zhi mei: dui shengtai yundong de sikao* 还自然之魅: 对生态运动的思考, trans. Zhuang Chenyan 庄晨燕 and Qiu Yinchun 邱寅晨 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhishanlian shudian [SDX Joint Publishing Company], 2005), 214–20. The book was originally published in French as *De la Nature: Pour Penser l'Écologie* (Paris: Editions Métailié, 2002).

12 “*Oikeios topos*” literally means the “favorable place” or “proper place,” suggesting the dynamic process by which organisms adapt to particular environments. Jason W. Moore 杰森 摩尔, *Diqiu de zhuanxing: zai xiandai shijie xingcheng he jieti zhong ziran de zuoyong* 地球的转型: 在现代世界形成和解体中自然的作用 [Transformation of the Earth: How Nature Matters in the Making & Re-making of the Modern World], trans. Zhao Xiurong 赵秀荣 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan [Commercial Press], 2015), 18, 113.

sometimes occurs in environmental history and offers a new paradigm with which to look at nature and society. All the changes in the universe, whether natural, physical, social, cultural, or ideological, can be reimagined from an ecological perspective as a process of energy redistribution. More importantly, even a social system that seems anti-nature is constrained by ecological relationships. No matter what excuses or means—such as mythology, religion, or science—humans have applied to confirm our particularity; to set up boundaries around ourselves to distinguish us from the animal and physical worlds, and locate ourselves on top of other species; and to establish the social or cultural order intrinsic to humans: the process of disassociation which renders society and nature opposed to each other and our role as humans in this process are still subject to ecological logic. As Serge Moscovici points out, this “independence of social and natural spheres, like the independence of humans and living and nonliving beings, is the independence of an individual and itself, and is the opposition between cultural living beings and biopsychological living beings”; “and society has become the second nature.”<sup>13</sup> Thus even our human understandings of the evolution of such ecological relationships—not just the explanations of historians, but the everyday understandings embedded in human culture—cannot elude ecological logic.

In employing “oikeios” to redefine the term “ecology,” Jason W. Moore borrows from the US environmental historian Donald Hughes. Hughes suggests that Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term “ecology” in the nineteenth century, might have based the “eco-oeco” part of the term on “oikeios” (appropriate)—instead of “oikos” (house), as dictionaries generally attest—which Aristotle and his student Theophrastus had used to refer to the habitat of an animal or plant species.<sup>14</sup> Yet in fact, the term “oikeios” is just the adjectival form of “oikos,” which originally meant house and went on to mean all the things in a house, a community, a family. And according to research by Robert Stauffer, Haeckel did use “oikos” rather than “oikeios” as the root of “ecology” (oecologie). Stauffer also explains in a footnote that the word means “household or housekeeping, living relations.” It is also the root of an older term, “economy.” Charles Darwin used the term “economy of nature” to indicate the living conditions for organ-

13 See Serge Moscovici 塞尔日 莫斯科维奇, introduction to *Fan ziran de shehui* 反自然的社会 [Society against Nature: The Emergence of Human Societies], trans. Huang Yulan 黄玉兰 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe [Tianjin People's Press], 2002), 1–29. This book was originally published in French as *La Société contre la Nature* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972).

14 Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 4, 207n7.

isms, which was later summarized as “ecology.” As for the definition of the term, the most representative and popularly quoted interpretation of Haeckel’s is: “By ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature—the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including, above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animal and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact—in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence.”<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, both Donald Worster in *Nature’s Economy* and Roderick Nash in *The Rights of Nature* accord with the interpretation that Haeckel derived “ecology” from “oikos.”<sup>16</sup> It would be better to continue to use “oikos” to refer to an ecological system that includes an organism and its environment, in order to further incorporate humans into nature on a broader scale. Meaningfully, two terms deriving from this same root have followed two distinct paths. “Economy” was originally, and is still, used to mean the study of how a community manages time, labor, and material resources, while “ecology” is often used to refer to the study of the interaction between organisms and their physical environment, as well as among organisms themselves. They represent humans and nature respectively. Now it is time to combine and integrate the two. The idea of ecology asks us to think of both organisms and their physical environment as part of the same, single system—i.e., the water and soil are as inseparable from a marsh habitat as the reeds that grow in it or the frogs that live in it. In human terms, our concept of “home” similarly combines the physical surroundings with the inhabitants and their lives. A home is more than just a building—it is a building that is lived in. In this sense, a complex featuring an inseparable coexistence of humans and nature can also be called a “home,” which could be seen as an interesting return to the origins of the word.

15 This translation is originally from W. C. Allee et al., *Principles of Animal Ecology* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1949) and cited in Robert C. Stauffer, “Haeckel, Darwin, and Ecology,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 32, no. 2 (June 1957): 138–44, <https://doi.org/10.1086/401754>. Stauffer comments that the translation is “free” rather than literal, but in his view faithful to Haeckel’s meaning.

16 Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 191–93; Roderick Frazier Nash 纳什, *Da ziran de quanli* 大自然的权利 [The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics], trans. Yang Tongjin 杨通进 (Qingdao: Qingdao chubanshe [Qingdao Press], 1999), 66–67.

## “Beloved Enemies are Destined to Be Together”: Joys and Sorrows, and Partings and Reunions of Human Beings and Nature

With the above discussions, we may now have a new angle to observe the human-nature relationship. Environmental or ecological historians typically share a basic consensus that humans and nature have an inseparable relationship, no matter whether the term used to describe it is Marx’s “objectivity,” ecofeminists’ “partnership,” or “environmental coordination,” “historical hybridity,” “coevolution,” etc. Everyone, including those who position themselves as firmly neutral scholars, has to make their own value judgment on this relationship, consciously or subconsciously. For example, US environmental historian Edmund Russell has suggested that the development of sericulture in China can be considered an example of coevolution. His story is clearly an optimistic interpretation: humans and silkworms have entered into a relationship of mutual benefit, where humans adapt their lifestyle to care for the silkworms’ needs, and in return are able to harvest and use the valuable silk.<sup>17</sup> Donald Worster, one of the founders of US environmental history, has expressed his doubts about this story, pointing out the unharmonious and rather violent side of the relationship—namely that harvesting silk involves killing huge numbers of silkworm pupae. And this is, on the contrary, a pessimistic perspective. In my opinion, the two versions of this story are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are entangled in a way that makes the ecological story richer and more interesting.

In this sense, I would instead use the metaphor of a marriage to describe the complicated relationship between humans and nature. Love is essential in a marriage, in spite of the small quarrels that happen all the time. Each quarrel, however, enables the couple to have a deeper understanding of each other and a better relationship. The Chinese people have a lot of sayings about this. For example, “opponents are meant to meet each other” (bu da bu xiangshi, 不打不相识), “the spoons will touch each other when eating out of the same pot” (tong zai yi guo chi, na neng bu pengshao, 同在一锅吃, 哪能不碰勺), or something more humorous like “fight on one side of the bed and make peace on the other” (chuang-tou chaojia chuanguangwei he, 床头吵架床尾合). Similarly, all the exchanges, collisions, and conflicts between humans and nature will lead to closer fusion and integration, which

17 Edmund Russell, “Spinning Their Way into History: Silkworms, Mulberries and Manufacturing Landscapes in China.” *Global Environment* 10, no. 1 (2017): 21–53, <https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2017.100102>. The article is a revised version of a talk originally given at the Center for Ecological History of Renmin University in Beijing on 28 May 2015.

will in turn lift their relationship to a higher level. As Edmund Russell says, all natural and social phenomena could be seen as a sort of landscape formed as the result of the interaction between humans and nature. This landscape, as a complex, constitutes an eternal yet ever-changing “home.” Humans and nature are both its family members. And the home keeps taking on new forms in the process of coevolution. This kind of history, to borrow an idea from Henri Bergson, is a creative evolution of confrontational coexistence.

There are several old Chinese myths and legends about the entangled and inseparable relationship between humans and nature. Among them, the best-known ones tell how Pangu separated the sky from the earth and Nuwa created humans out of mud. According to the myths, Pangu’s body was transformed into mountains and rivers and other things after he died. But there were no humans. Nuwa felt very lonely when she traveled in the world, so she used earth and water to make humans. Soon there were people everywhere. But they would all die someday. In order to let humankind survive, Nuwa became a matchmaker between men and women so that they would procreate. Nuwa is therefore regarded as the Chinese goddess of marriage. Couples, however, don’t always get along with each other. There are also quarrels and conflicts. That is why there are so many happy and sad love stories passed down from ancient times. During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 CE), Zhao Mengfu, a famous calligrapher, married Guan Daosheng. They loved each other very much at first. But later Zhao wanted to make another woman his concubine. The perfect family life was about to be turned upside down. Guan Daosheng was a smart woman. She didn’t confront her husband directly. Instead, she wrote him the following poem:

你依我依，忒煞情多；  
 情多处，热如火。  
 把一块泥，捻一个你，塑一个我。  
 将咱两个，一起打碎，用水调和。  
 再捻一个你，再塑一个我；  
 我泥中有你，你泥中有我。  
 我与你，生同一个衾，死同一个椁。<sup>18</sup>

18 Xu Qiu 徐钊, ed., *Ciyuan Congtan Jiaojian* 词苑丛谈校笺, proofread and footnoted by Wang Baili (Beijing: People Literature Press, 1988), 633.

*You're in my heart just like I'm in yours, with so much love;  
Where the love is, it's torrid as fire.  
Take the earth, mold it into both you and me.  
Break us into two pieces, and mix with water.  
Remold you and remodel me.  
I am embodied in you just like you are embodied in me.  
We'll live and sleep under the same blanket, and die and rest in the same coffin.*

As a historian of disasters, I often use this story to describe the changing relationship between humans and nature when confronted with disasters. The words “break,” “mix,” and “remodel” can be seen as pointing to catastrophic events. “You” and “I” represent nature and humans respectively, while the broken and remodeled “earth” refers to the ecosystem that constructs “you,” “I,” the “coffin” after death, or the “blanket” (or home) while we are still alive. Such an ecosystem—like the human and natural subsystems within it—is not an isolated and closed physical particle or system, but an open, dissipative structure, a “swirl” reflecting constant disturbances and seeming chaos—a dynamic system, in equilibrium. The “you” and “I” do not disintegrate or melt in the process of mutual collision and permeation, but absorb each other’s effect such that each becomes a new individual, forming a new ecosystem in closer association with each other. “Home” is still the same “home” while its connotation has changed.

The above story is a comedy with a hint of irony. There are tragedies as well. During the East Jin dynasty (roughly 1,500 years ago, 265–420 CE), a scholar called Gan Bao included the following myth in his compilation *In Search of the Supernatural*. The myth explained the origin of China’s silkworm and mulberry industry.

There is an old story which tells that in ancient times a man went on a long journey leaving no one at home save his daughter and a stallion which she had reared herself. Living in straitened circumstances and in a secluded place, she missed her father so much that she said to the stallion in jest: “If you find my father and bring him back for me, I’ll marry you.”

Immediately on hearing these words, that horse broke its tether and galloped off to where her father was. . . . He mounted the horse in haste and rode back. He began

to take special care of the horse, which had shown such intelligence; he offered it extra fodder, which the horse refused to eat. However, every time the stallion saw the man's daughter moving about, it would become excited and animated and rear and paw the earth. This happened so many times and made the man so curious that he questioned his daughter in secret. She told him what she had said to the horse, adding, "This must be the reason."

. . . He secretly took his crossbow, slew the beast, skinned it, and hung the hide in his courtyard.

When he went a-journeying again, his daughter and a neighbor girl were playing with the hide. The daughter kicked it, crying, "You were nothing but a beast of burden, yet you thought to wed a human! You brought this death upon yourself, so you should feel no resentment!"

As she spoke, the hide rose up, wrapped itself around the daughter and galloped off. The neighbor girl . . . fled and told the girl's father. . . .

After several days, the girl and the horsehide were found bound together among the limbs of a tree where they had become a silkworm spinning itself into a cocoon. This cocoon was large in diameter and length—very different from the ordinary kind. The women of the neighborhood gathered this kind of chrysalis and reared the worms to gain many times the profit they turned before.

Because of this story, people named the tree on which the girl and the horsehide were found the *sang* tree [mulberry] because *sang* means lost. Everyone now cultivates this kind of tree, and the silkworm of today is descended from that first ancient cocoon.<sup>19</sup>

19 Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural*, trans. Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 165–6.

This is the story of the silkworm god. It looked as if it had a human body and a horse's head, hence the nickname "horse-head maid." We can interpret this story as an illustration of how humans often see nature as something irrelevant and treat it in a disrespectful way. Humans have to pay the price if they use nature as a tool but treat it badly. Nature's retribution creates another form of human-nature coexistence. Instead of humans tolerating nature, nature engulfs humans, just as the horsehide engulfs the girl in this story. Here we see a reflection of the so-called "post-human age." The ending of the story above is sad but not pessimistic. People can draw lessons from it and try to avoid similar tragedies. That's why, over thousands of years, there have been numerous tear-jerking love stories between human beings and the spirits of nonhuman beings, such as *The Cowherd and the Weaving Girl* (Niulang zhinü, 牛郎织女), *The Match between the Goddess and the Man* (Tianxian pei, 天仙配), and *The Legend of the White Snake* (Baishe zhuan, 白蛇传).

It seems that the relationship between humans and nature is indeed like a marriage. Tied to each other by virtue of technology, they create various kinds of beautiful and fantastic landscapes on the earth, both pleasant and unpleasant. In other words, what is sometimes called coevolution is not entirely the harmonious process we imagine it to be; instead of a linear progression towards a predetermined goal, it is a messy, contested process. We should take "evolution" as incorporating the diverse results of progress, retrogression, or stagnation, instead of merely a kind of progress tending towards perfection. The flowers of life that blossom on the way bring you both joy and sorrow.

What's more, we have to remember that in terms of overall significance, the human-nature "couple" cannot choose to split up as human partners in a marriage might. However badly we get along, we can never separate ourselves from nature and exist alone. From an ecocentric perspective, "the death of nature" or "the end of nature" will never happen. Only human beings can disappear, but nature goes on and can find other species to act as its partners. Before humans existed, it was dinosaurs, and when humans die out, we don't know yet what will replace us. It may be cockroaches, which have been around for several hundred million years (nicknamed "Xiao Qiang," or "browny," by Chinese young people). That future "post-human era" may carry deep marks made by the current human population; but its literally post-human landscape will only provide an object for "Xiao Qiang" to mourn or imagine. In my opinion, the Anthropocene—at least, if this is understood as a time when humans dominate ev-

everything completely—has never existed. Humans can only be active within the “iron cage” of nature, while nature exists, develops, and generates exciting power by virtue of human activities. What I advocate for a new history is an ecocentric understanding that focuses on the relationship between humans and nature and on how both of them are indispensable. Human beings depend on nature to live while nature thrives because of human existence. Even though nature can be viewed as the parents of humans, how can parents exist without a child? In my view, we are dealing with humans and nature as an “ill-matched couple” as well as with a kind of “dialectics of ecology.”

### **The Same Origin, the Parting Flows: The Divergence of Western and Chinese Ecological Perception and the Global Ecological Crisis**

We certainly cannot stop our discussion here. I must admit that I am not the first person to think of the idea of using marriage and the home to understand the relationship between humans and nature. I learned it from former generations. Since ancient times, various cultures around the world, both in China and the West, have often used these kinds of metaphors to describe the relationship between humans and nature. The specific connotations may vary in different places and times, but if seen from a longer historical perspective, since humanity started to ponder its status in the universe, a comparison between the Chinese tradition and the Western tradition shows that these love stories, which at first glance seem irrelevant to ecological history, in fact have special significance.

In the introduction to *Timaeus*, Plato’s only work discussing the universe and the origin of humankind, the ancient Greek philosopher quoted a story from remote antiquity, around 9,000 years before Solon’s era, in which the Athenians defeated an army from Atlantis. This story frequently mentioned “our goddess,” Athena, who had created and ruled the Greek state and was regarded as the “common protector, nurturer and guide” of contemporary Greece and Saïs, in Egypt (*Timaeus* 23d–e, 24b–d). In the main text which follows, Plato introduced the concept of “the father of the universe” or “creator” through Timaeus’s narration, which postulated that the universe was a living thing that had reason and a soul, and was made by the “creator” who imitated an unchanging and eternal model (*Timaeus* 37d). There were four types of living being within the universe as an organism, namely gods in heaven, winged creatures, under-

water creatures, and creatures that live on the land (*Timaeus* 40a–b). In addition, there were the gods in heaven, including the most respected one, the earth, designed as the nurturer of humankind and referred to by Plato as “she” (*Timaeus* 40c). The gods were first created by the creator according to its own model, and in turn later created other living beings on the orders of the creator. Those gods and their descendants also had their own family trees: Oceanus (the god of oceans) and Tethys (the mother of all river gods), children of Uranus (the sky) and Gaea (the earth), gave birth to Phorkys, Cronus, and Rhea; Cronus and Rhea in turn gave birth to Zeus and Hera, who themselves had many siblings and descendants (*Timaeus* 40d–e).

According to Plato, this process of cosmogony was the combination of three kinds of existence: the first was the “Becoming” (τὸ μὲν γιγνόμενον), the second was the “Space” “Wherein” it becomes (τὸ δ’ ἐν ᾧ γίγνεται), and the third was the “Being,” the source “Wherefrom” the Becoming (τὸ δ’ ὅθεν ἀφομοιούμενον φύεται τὸ γιγνόμενον) is copied and produced (*Timaeus* 50c–d). They could also be translated as “the created world, the receptacle of creation, and the source, in whose likeness the created world is born.”<sup>20</sup> The “Space” wherein it becomes was not only a container, a self-refilling place “which exists for ever and is indestructible, and which acts as the arena for everything that is subject to creation” (*Timaeus* 52a–b), but also some sort of primary material, shapeless and characterless, which could receive any forms or impressions and generate objects that could be perceived by the senses (*Timaeus* 51a–b). And these objects were copies of figures that exist forever and were formed when the figures entered and left the “Space,” which was laid down by nature as the stuff from which everything is molded (*Timaeus* 50c). From Plato’s point of view, this “marvelous and hard to describe” process of copies being “stamped” resembled “sowing seeds” between male and female humans (or other animals). Towards the end of the dialogue, when investigating the creation of humankind, Plato mentioned intercourse between the two sexes: arranged by the gods, “we” (that is to say, men)<sup>21</sup> had some vital stuff or creature placed inside us, the “seed,” which was injected into another creature, which

20 Plato 柏拉图, *Dimaïou pian* 蒂迈欧篇 [Timaeus], trans. Xie Wenyu (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chubanshijuan [Shanghai Century Publishing Group], 2003): 17, 19–34. The English translation quoted is from Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2008), 42. Readers may also wish to consult one of the online translations available for free. For these three kinds of existence, Plato had different formulations: ὄν, χώρον, and γένεσιν (*Timaeus* 52d); or εἶδος, χώρα, and εἰζών (*Timaeus* 52b–c).

21 Waterfield interprets the description of the origin of (hetero)sexual desire in *Timaeus* as confirmation that Plato believed the original human population was male. See Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield, 155, explanatory note to 91a.

dwelt in women's wombs, by some disobedient and self-willed power. This then created other tiny creatures, which were conceived in the body, grew in the womb, and were eventually "brought forth into the light and thus completed the generation of the living creature" (*Timaeus* 91b–d). Gods themselves could also be seen as the outcome of the creator's action of sowing seeds. Henceforth, they received their orders from the creator, used the seeds bestowed by the creator, and accomplished the creation of all the other entities in the universe except for themselves (*Timaeus* 41b–d, 42d–e). It might be in this sense that Plato called the receptacle the mother, the source the father, and what the two together created the child.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of interpretation unintentionally reflects the transition of ancient European belief from the "Mother World" to the "Mother Earth," in line with a shift from broadly egalitarian gender relations to patriarchy.<sup>23</sup> The once androgynous world became a dual world where the heavens were the father and the earth the mother. The formation and reproduction of lives were recognized and emphasized. There are some different interpretations of the relationship between humans and the earth in the Bible, according to which "earth is no longer the human beings' mother" but "merely the raw material for the Creator's work."<sup>24</sup> Even in the Old Testament, the first story of the Creation implies an androgynous God, with sexual difference introduced when humans are created (Genesis 1:26–27, 2:7–8, 2:18–24). The Bible also absorbed parts of the pagan feast of heaven and earth into the Sabbath and depicted the kingdom of God as a marriage feast (Mat-

22 Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield, 44–45, 97. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood also pays attention to this metaphor of Plato's in her book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 84–85.

23 Based on the excavation and research she carried out in Europe over many years, Lithuanian American archeologist Marija Gimbutas regards Western culture since Greek myth and the Homeric Hymns as the outcome of a process in which the prehistoric culture of goddess worship, the so-called "old European culture," was conquered, assimilated, and incorporated by the later patriarchal, male-centric culture ("Euro-Asian culture"). See Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000–3500 BC* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Maria Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses: Religion in Pre-Patriarchal Europe*, ed. Mariam R. Dexter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). US cultural anthropologist Riane Eisler suggests that the transformation in beliefs that occurred throughout the vast area of Europe and west Asia, including ancient Greece and Egypt, was a shift in the pattern of human social organization from the prehistoric egalitarian partnership between the sexes to the hierarchical institution dominated by men. Or to use the terms she coined, it was a shift from "gylany," based on gender equality and cooperation, to "androcracy," in which men dominated. Eisler also draws on a lot of archaeological findings since the 1930s to argue that the Atlantis legend mentioned in *Timaeus* might actually be the distorted memory of the Minoan Civilization of ancient Crete. See Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

24 Jürgen Moltmann 莫尔特曼, *Chuangzao zhong de shangdi: shengtai de chuangzao lun 创造中的上帝: 生态的创造论*, trans. Wei Renlian 隗仁莲 et al. (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian [SDX Joint Publishing Company], 2002), 403–8. Quoted text is from the English translation by Margaret Kohl, published as *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 302.

thew 22:2, 25:1). This kind of feast showed the original creation of life after the union of heaven and earth, sun and earth. “Every human union participates in the hierogamy of the heavenly god and the earthly goddess, and imitates it” and “human beings . . . experience in their own union their unity with the universe.”<sup>25</sup> In the eyes of Christian theologians, the Trinitarian God is similar to a nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and their offspring.<sup>26</sup> Moltmann, a modern German theologian explained:

The anthropological triangle determines the existence of every human being: everyone is a man *or* a woman, *and* the child of his or her parents. The relation between man and wife signifies the inextinguishable sociality of human beings, while the relation between parents and children denotes the equally unalterable generativity of human beings. The first is the simultaneous community of the sexes in space; the second the community of the generations in time. If the whole human being is designated the image of God, then true human community—the community of the sexes and the community of the generations—has the same designation.<sup>27</sup>

From ancient Greece to the Renaissance in the sixteenth century, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, and others have kept the symbolic expression or metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother alive in the European cultural tradition by using it in literature, philosophy, religion, witchcraft, and other areas. US environmental historian Carolyn Merchant had a refreshing discussion on this in her book *The Death of Nature*. She sees it as an important feature of the organic cosmology of the West. I would like to cite a few examples from that book. The Christian Cathedral School of Chartres in the twelfth century combined the Bible and *Timaeus* to personify nature as a goddess who acted as a midwife to help turn ideas (likened to a father) into material things. And what came out of this process was compared to a child. Alchemists in the fourteenth century also adopted from Gnosticism the unity of opposites and the equality of the male principles and female principles in generation, emphasizing the unity between the sun and the moon as “the two great male and female principles in nature,” and between the male mineral mercury and female *prima materia*. Nature was seen as an androgynous complex, an essence that was “genera-

25 Moltmann, *Chuangzao zhong de shangdi*, trans. Wei Renlian et al., 409–11. Quoted text is from the English translation by Margaret Kohl, *God in Creation*, 303–4.

26 Moltmann, *Chuangzao zhong de shangdi*, 320.

27 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl, 241, italics in the original. The quotation is found on page 328 of the Chinese translation by Wei Renlian et al.

tive and productive of all things,” according to the scholar Ralph Cudworth in 1678. Alchemists and occultists in the seventeenth century also depicted the sun as a man and the moon as a woman, as shown by the alchemist and mystic Thomas Vaughan’s description of the sun and moon (male and female) as “two equal peers, the consummation of their marriage . . . a total unity resulting in the nurturing of their seed in the womb of the earth.”<sup>28</sup>



Figure 1:  
This painting of a hermaphrodite is from the late-fourteenth-century alchemical treatise *The Aurora consurgens*. Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, Ms. Rh. 172, f. VD-2 – Aurora consurgens (<http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/zbz/Ms-Rh-0172>).

The Chinese tradition may have traveled a similar path. The legend of Nuwa reflects the matriarchal worship of the goddess and the nature she created. In *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, the formation of the universe is compared to how a child is born: “It is the woman, primal mother; her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.” It gives birth and nurtures all living things tirelessly.<sup>29</sup> After the pre-Qin period (before 201 BCE), however, concepts like “Father Heaven and Mother Earth” were more popular. Even Nuwa began to be often linked with Fuxi, a male god. Stories like the one about the silkworm god also to some extent compare the union between humans and animals to the marriage between men and women. The primary Chinese classic, the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, as well as later interpretations of it, also has a constant theme

28 Carolyn Merchant 卡洛琳 麦茜特, *Ziran zhi si: funü, shengtai he keji geming* 自然之死: 妇女, 生态和科技革命, trans. Wu Guosheng 吴国盛 et al. (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe [Jilin People’s Publishing House], 1999), 11–12, figure 2; 20–22, figure 4; 22–24 figure 5. The quoted sections are taken from the original English version *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 1989), 19.

29 Chinese Partnership Research Team 中国伙伴关系研究小组著, *Yanggang yu yinrou de bianzou: Liangxing guanxi he shehui moshi* 阳刚与阴柔的变奏: 两性关系和社会模式 [The Variation of Yanggang and Yinrou: Gender Relations and Social Models], ed. Min Jiayin 闵家胤. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe [China Social Sciences Press], 1995), 19–21; She Zhengrong 佘正荣. *Zhongguo shengtai lunli chuantong de quanshi yu zhongjian* 中国生态伦理传统的诠释与重建 [Interpretation and Reconstruction of Chinese Ecological Ethic Traditions] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe [People’s Publishing House], 2002), 327–28.

about the relationship between Yin and Yang. All the changes in the universe—no matter if they are described as the separation of the sky and the land, or, as in Tai Chi, as the heaven and earth which generate the four images, or as the heaven and earth which lead to the formation of all things—could be seen from the perspective of the relationship between Yin and Yang, the male and the female.<sup>30</sup> Dong Zhongshu, a Confucian scholar during the West Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), commented that, “The Yin and Yang of the world should be seen as the male and female of people, whereas the male and female of people should be seen as Yin and Yang. These two sets of concepts are interchangeable indeed.”<sup>31</sup>

Confucianism and Taoism have different understandings of the status of Yin and Yang in the birth and death of all things in the universe, while resorting to a similar model of explanation. Confucianism calls the heaven, the earth, and people the “three talents” (*san cai*, 三才). According to Dong Zhongshu, these three elements are “the roots of all things.” He further writes, “The heaven creates, the earth nurtures, and the people fulfill” and, “The three are like different parts of a body, the body cannot function well without any one of them.”<sup>32</sup> Chu Hsi, a Confucian scholar during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), also stressed the parallel relationship among the three. He believed that “the saint is like the child of heaven and earth.” But heaven and earth give birth to the saint so that he could do the things that heaven and earth cannot do.



**Figure 2:** Hemp painting of Fuxi and Nuwa, Tang dynasty, unearthed from the 76th Asitana cemetery in Turpan, Xinjiang, 1967, 184cm long and 85cm wide on the top and 75cm wide on the bottom. Most paintings of this type found in this place are painted on silk or linen cloth. Many of them are nailed onto the tomb's ceiling with wooden nails, facing the tomb owner; and a few of them are folded and wrapped, located next to the dead. The male in this painting is Fuxi, on the right-hand side, holding a straightedge in his left hand; the female is Nuwa, on the left, with a compass in her right hand. Both of them have human heads and snake bodies, and the snake tails are intertwined. On the top, there is an image of the sun; and below the tail, there is an image of the moon; and the whole image is surrounded by stars. Source: Zhongguo gu dai shu hua jian ding zu (中国古代书画鉴定组), via Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anonymous-Fuxi\\_and\\_N%C3%BCwa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anonymous-Fuxi_and_N%C3%BCwa.jpg).

30 Chinese Partnership Research Team, *Yanggang yu yinrou de bianzou: Liangxing guanxi he shehui moshi* 阳刚与阴柔的变奏：两性关系和社会模式 [The Variation of Yanggang and Yinrou: Gender Relations and Social Models], 18–22.

31 Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, “Xun tian zhi dao di qi shi qi” 循天之道第七十七 [No 77: Follow the Way of Heaven], in *Dong Zhongshu ji* 董仲舒集 [Collected Works of Dong Zhongshu], ed. Yuan Changjiang 袁长江. (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe [Academy Press], 2003), 357.

32 Dong Zhongshu, *Dong Zhongshu ji* 董仲舒集 [Collected Works of Dong Zhongshu], ed. Yuan Changjiang 袁长江, 145.

This is explained as “people are born in between heaven and earth and work to redress the balance.”<sup>33</sup>

In Lao Tzu’s Taoism (ca. sixth century BCE), according to Jiang Chaojun, the Dao or the way, is “something that has emotion, character, and flesh. Therefore, the world that derived from this ‘Dao’ is also a world with emotion, character, and flesh. Then Zhuang Zi (fourth century BCE) went on to call heaven and earth the ‘parents of all things.’ And Taoism compares the organic ecological system encompassing heaven, earth, people, and other things to a big family.”<sup>34</sup> This big family is also usually called the “three talents” (san cai, 三才), or sometimes the “the unity of three” (san tong, 三统). There are many similar metaphors in the *Scripture of the Great Peace*, an early classic of the Taoist religion. For instance, “The unity of heaven, earth, and humans is based on the interdependence among the three” and, “Heaven, earth, and people are a family. Heaven is the father, earth is the mother, people are the children,” just to name a few.

The world is propelled by the opposing forces of Yin and Yang. But it must be emphasized that the two elements cannot be used willfully. We rarely see ancient classics matching Yin/Yang to nature/people. According to Chu Hsi, the relationship between Yin and Yang involves people, “material entities” (物; these comprise plants, animals, and inorganic substance), and “ghosts.” The idea of “harmony between heaven and humans” proposed by ancient peoples is not an equivalent of the unity between humans and nature as we understand it today. It is critical to make this clarification in order for us to have a new understanding of the environmental cognition of China’s ancient peoples. Usually, “heaven” doesn’t represent the whole of nature or the universe, it is only a part of the latter. It is a separate idea as compared to earth, people, and “material entities.” They together form a big universe via sympathy. This picture of the universe shares many similarities with Plato’s account of the universe, as well as with some unorthodox interpretations of the Bible.

Plato’s cosmology, however, has extremely profound inherent conflicts. First, his conception of the universe actually includes two separated sides. One Nature is capitalized, filled with eternal rationality and order. The other is lowercase and one with

33 Kim Yung Sik 金永植, *Zhu Xi de ziran zhexue* 朱熹的自然哲学 [The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe [East China Normal University Press], 2003), 129–33

34 Jiang Chaojun 蒋朝君, *Daojiao shengtai lunli sixiang yanjiu* 道教生态伦理思想研究 [A Study on the Thoughts of Taoist Ecological Ethics] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe [Oriental Press], 2006), 225–38.

changes, instability, and chaos. Humankind—or, more precisely, male humans—as celestial instead of terrestrial creatures, is associated with reason and eternity, and is distinguished from lowercase nature, the earth, or “the world of Appearance” represented by the famous allegory of the “cave” from Plato’s *Republic*.<sup>35</sup> This indicates a sharp opposition between humans and nature. Second, as the universe was created by giving shape to physical, perceptible substance according to an ideal that served as a model, it embodies the marriage of rationality and material. However, since rationality has “the upper hand over an inferiorised and backgrounded partner,” this marriage is a patriarchal one that features the control and domination of rational male substance (cosmos) over irrational female substance (chaos).<sup>36</sup> Third, although Plato’s universe is regarded as an organism composed of being, space, and becoming, the four elements constituting the organism (water, air, fire, and earth) are transformed and shaped through dismantling and recombining the two basic right-angled triangles from which all elements derive their origin in different ways (*Timaeus* 53d–57d). After the three-part universe has been created, this trinity is ultimately presented in a beautiful mathematical form, i.e., the geometric model, and exists in all things in the universe. This is the origin of the mechanistic explanation of nature made by later generations.

Plato’s theory and subsequent interpretations of it by others have had a profound influence on Christian theology. During the Renaissance, this theological tradition was joined with modern science to form a new concept of the world. The once hidden or apparent belief in “Father Heaven and Mother Earth” was replaced by a system of explanation that emphasized the dichotomy between humankind and nature. The nature that included heaven, earth, and all material things was associated with the female. Humans, as the spokespeople of God, were symbolically male, with a dominant role over nature (although “male,” in this case, in fact applied more strictly to the white European male). Humans and nature were completely torn apart, conceptually speaking. Organic cosmology was replaced by a mechanistic view of nature. Women were also seen as having equal status to nature, which became used as a justification for the continued existence of a patriarchal society. Other cultures and their habitats, such as the indigenous civilizations of the Americas, were deemed to be the wild kind of

35 See Book 7 of *The Republic*, available online (trans. Benjamin Jowett) at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>.

36 Val Plumwood 薇尔 普鲁姆德, *Nǚxìng zhuyì yǔ duì zìrán de zhǔzài* 女性主义与对自然的主宰, trans. Ma Tianjie 马天杰 and Li Lili 李丽丽 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2007), 63–104. The quoted text is found in the English edition, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 85.

nature yet to be conquered by modern Western civilization. The relationship between humankind and nature, as well as interpersonal relationships between humans, has fully disassociated. If Plato's idea of "escaping from the cave" was merely a spiritual aspiration, then the mining activities going on everywhere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were concrete acts of violence directed against the cave of nature, or the Nurturer Earth.<sup>37</sup>

In that sense, the article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" by US historian Lynn White Jr. is rather enlightening. White attributes the plunder and devastating destruction of nature by Western civilization to the dichotomous ethical system that organizes human beings and nature in the Western world. He blames the Judeo-Christian tradition for giving rise to this culture.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, in China, until the Opium War there had not been any fundamental changes to the above-discussed framework of interpreting the universe largely according to the theory of Yin and Yang (yinyang, 阴阳) and the five elements (wu xing, 五行). The same basic framework only took on different forms over time. Does this, however, mean that we could turn to the other extreme from the situation that Lynn White Jr. criticizes—i.e., could we find the key to solving the environmental and ecological crisis in the world in Chinese culture?

Undoubtedly, we could list many successful cases in this regard, such as the Dujiangyan irrigation system in Szechuan, the Lingqu Canal in Guangxi, the "mulberry-based fish pond" in the Pearl River Delta, and the less well-known Xibe irrigation ditch in Yili, Xinjiang. All of these show how the Chinese nation, with a history of several thousand years, has used its ecological wisdom to pursue harmony among heaven, earth, and people. Neither can we deny that Western culture has applied Eastern wisdom creatively in its own ecological transformation. For instance, the ancient Chinese organic view of nature based on correlative thinking has had impacts on modern Western new physics, deep ecology, and process philosophy to different extents.<sup>39</sup> But we have to be fully aware that when we see the idea of "the oneness between heaven and humans" throughout the long history of Chinese civilization, we must also admit that China has experienced "unsustainable development for 3,000 years," as Mark Elvin

37 Merchant 卡洛琳 麦茜特, *Ziran zhi si* 自然之死 [The Death of Nature], trans. Wu Guosheng 吴国盛 et al., 45–49.

38 Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

39 See Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Boston: Shambhala, 1975) and *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

has commented.<sup>40</sup> This striking contrast has triggered huge interest amongst scholars at home and abroad; some people even call this dilemma the “Needham Paradox” in the field of Chinese environmental history.<sup>41</sup>

Some people explain this as a result of the dichotomy between theory and practice. This is not necessarily entirely incorrect. But those successful examples are without exception the crystallization of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom. Some review the ancient civilizations that have already disappeared and come to the conclusion that the advance of civilizations inevitably comes at a certain cost to the natural and ecological environment. The fact that Chinese civilization has lasted into the modern era, in contrast to the sudden demise of other early civilizations, should be attributed to a large extent to “its cultural characteristics that respect the natural environment and the needs of other living beings (i.e., animals).”<sup>42</sup>

This might be the problem: both of the above explanations interpret the ecological perceptions of ancient China in an abstract and reductive way, ignoring the intrinsic tensions and paradoxes of those perceptions as well as the confrontations and conflicts existing in the specific practices related to those perceptions. We shouldn’t erect an overly thick barrier between the dominant Confucian tradition and the damage to the environment.

The first tension is the coexistence of the integration of heaven, earth, and people, and the dichotomy between “people” and “material entities” (nonhuman living beings and nonliving entities). The Chinese legends about human-animal romance and the sexual confrontation contained in them reflected the tension between humans and birds and

40 Mark Elvin, “Three Thousand Years of Unsustainable Growth: China’s Environment from Archaic Times to the Present,” *East Asian History*, no. 6 (December 1993): 7–46.

41 Jiang Chaojun 蒋朝君, *Daojiao shengtai lunli sixiang yanjiu* 道教生态伦理思想研究 [A Study on the Thoughts of Taoist Ecological Ethics], 465–69. The “Needham puzzle” or “Needham thesis,” which was coined by the acclaimed British historian of science Joseph Needham in the 1950s and 1960s, comprises two seemingly contradictory questions: 1. Why did modern science only develop within Europe, instead of in Chinese (or Indian) civilization? 2. Why was Chinese civilization much more effective than Western civilization in terms of applying knowledge of nature to meet human practical needs from the 1st century BCE to the 15th century CE? See Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969). Chinese environmental historians employ this puzzle in their own field, asking: why has China had enduring and increasingly severe environmental problems throughout its history, despite its long ideological tradition of ecological conservation?

42 Jiang Chaojun 蒋朝君, *Daojiao shengtai lunli sixiang yanjiu* 道教生态伦理思想研究 [A Study on the Thoughts of Taoist Ecological Ethics], 465–68.

beasts rather than the harmony between heaven and humankind that we advocate today.<sup>43</sup>

Second, Confucianism sees people as a combination of heaven and earth, Yin and Yang. This view of humanity contrasts with the Christian view, in which people see themselves as the replicas of their God and therefore as entitled to rule the land. Yet still, according to Confucianism, people are the wisest of all creatures and can advise or even change the way heaven runs with their benevolent rule. They are masters who are higher than “material entities,” different from earth and close to heaven. This Confucian tradition brings to the fore the role of people (or more precisely, the rulers). So it is not much different from the view of humankind conquering nature. This view is evidenced by the numerous massive anti-nature engineering projects in China, the most outstanding examples being the Great Wall and the Grand Canal. Taoism and the Taoist religion, on the other hand, conform to the fundamental role of heaven, earth, and nature and advocate that Dao (the way), heaven, and earth are important, and that people (rulers) are also important (“dao da, tian da, di da, ren yi da,” “道大, 天大, 地大, 人亦大”). Undeniably, however, this conformity to nature is more of a reclusive behavior and reflects a cynical attitude.

Third, similar to how Christian theology has served the interests of the hierarchical Western religious authorities, royalty, and patriarchy, Confucian cosmology has served the political rule of the Chinese emperors and patriarchs as it has tried to legitimize an unreasonable distribution of resources over thousands of years. In addition, the dominant ethnic group has held ethnocentric views and looked down upon minority groups, even seeing them as animals. Though not as straightforward as the fact that Christian beliefs have long been directly used as an excuse for aggression and conquering, the obsession with agricultural civilization in China usually led to spontaneous and sustained agricultural expansion, which to some extent changed the fragile ecological system of the remote border areas and did damage to the environment there.

Fourth is the conflict between the idea of “home” in the sense of the entire world we live in and “home” in the sense of the individual dwellings people create for them-

43 Wan Jianzhong 万建中, *Jiedu jinji: zhongguo shenhua, chuanshuo he gushi zhong de jinji zhuti* 解读禁忌: 中国神话, 传说和故事中的禁忌主题 [Interpreting Taboos: Taboo Subjects in Chinese Myths, Legends, and Stories] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan [Commercial Press], 2001), 93.

selves. After all, people also exist as a society. They form a small universe within the big universe. The family, as the basic unit of society that production and life are based on, is tied to a specific geographic location. Agrarian eras highly valued the continuity of the family line and encouraged people to have a large family. There was a saying that “there are three cardinal offences to filial piety and the gravest one is having no male heir.” This belief led to the expansion of family size and the increase and migration of the population, which in turn led to the development and utilization of natural resources across larger areas. This resulted in large population pressure and the reduction of resource reserves, finally trapping the whole society in cyclic crises and turbulence. Not every family, in the small space where they live, would necessarily give up on the pursuit of a harmonious relationship to nature. Families that were better off would even try to build a microcosm of the world within their house in order to appreciate the beauty of nature.<sup>44</sup> But the more successful these attempts were, the more pressure they put on the environment at the macro level.

On the eve of the Opium War, China was in the midst of an unprecedented general ecological crisis. It was an era of population growth, environmental degradation, great climate change, and an explosion of peasant uprisings. Thus, it was one of Chinese society’s most vulnerable times, which provided opportunities for Western powers to invade and loot this country. We cannot deny China’s former glory in the eighteenth century, but even the US “California School,” which considers China at that time to have been equally powerful and wealthy as England on the other side of Eurasia, has to admit that China failed to take the road to industrial revolution because of its grave ecological crisis.<sup>45</sup>

Without a doubt, this ideological divergence predicted and led to the great divergence of the Chinese and Western economies in the eighteenth century. The Eastern “home” lost to the Western “home” in the Opium War. As a result, the Eastern “home” became “wilderness” to be developed by the Western “home.” But unlike the American indigenous civilizations, the Eastern “home” hasn’t been totally nibbled up by the Western

44 Tang Xiyang 唐锡阳, “Zhongguo chuantong de lüse wenhua” 中国传统的绿色文化 [Traditional Green Culture of China], in *Tiandì yu wǒ: yàzhōu zìrán bǎohù lǚnlǐ* 天地与我: 亚洲自然保护伦理 [Heaven and Earth and I: Ethics of Nature Conservation in Asia], ed. Menon Vivek 载维韦 卡梅龙 and Masayuki Sakamoto 坂元正吉编 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe [China University of Political Science and Law Press], 2005), 40.

45 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

“home.” On the contrary, it followed the example of the Western “home” and started to break into its own “wilderness” that had yet to be modernized. This wilderness, of course, is wild not only in a natural sense, but also economically and culturally. It is indeed a contrast to Western modernity. Through exploration, resistance, and fighting, the Eastern “home” finally gained a comfortable status in the world with independence and prosperity. At the same time, it carried out an overall transformation of rural society, where the quintessence of traditional Chinese culture lay, and inevitably brought about a new ecological crisis. The crisis is caused by the Chinese people’s yearning for wealth and strength, which was catalyzed in the first place by colonial capital. Its current development has also set the stage for the expansion of global capital. On the other hand, the Chinese people’s option to welcome or refuse global capital also offers an alternative for solving the current global ecological crisis.

### **Toward a Harmonious Ecological Community**

Where on earth are we heading? To keep on struggling in the so-called Anthropocene, or inevitably slide into the “post-human era,” or instead move towards the “Ecozoic Era”<sup>46</sup> in which humans and nature will live in symbiosis?

For a very long time, people from across the world have drawn up numerous blueprints for a more sustainable society and put forward numerous proposals and solutions. From time to time, people have also taken action in response to ecological destruction. These efforts, however, could never get around a most essential concept: community, as described in bioregionalism or in Aldo Leopold’s land ethic. Theories of community, in the minds of most researchers and practitioners, typically deal directly with the abstract person that is extremely individualized, and with the purely human community from an anthropocentric perspective. This offers the possibility to transcend the ego and establish an equal union among humans in a specific geological region and to jointly cope with environmental issues and ecological crisis. Yet if, as in the land ethic, the same principles are pushed further and human ethics are applied to

46 This is a new concept introduced by ecological theologian Thomas Berry, referring to a new era of the earth biosystem emerging after the Mesozoic Era and the Cenozoic Era, which embraces Earth’s integral living community and invites human history, in concert with natural history, into uncharted realms of beauty, diversity, abundance, and freedom. Cited in Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” *Environmental Humanities* 3 (2013): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3611266>.

a nature that also includes soil, water, animals, and plants, an ecological community incorporating humans and nature becomes possible, thus covering a bigger ecological network in order to facilitate a fundamental change in humans' perception of nature. In the process of building such a community, the physical "home" and "family," which mediate between individual humans and the community, are sometimes neglected. But basic ethical principles such as affection, cooperation, care, and love among family members are still there. Therefore, they can be deemed to be the extension of human family spirit in a symbolic sense.

In fact, at the advent of mass industrialization, many thinkers, theologians, and historians already envisioned this kind of future community, which bonded humans and nature, as a "home." For example, in the third volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx described a good head of the family as someone who passed on improved land to family members of the next generation.<sup>47</sup> And since the 1960s and 1970s, theories like "stewardship," "household ethics," and "the home of the God" have become quite popular, with increased emphasis in Western Christian theology on greening.<sup>48</sup> There was also the partnership between humans and nature advocated by ecofeminism and the attention to the urban "home"—the human habitat—as elaborated by Frederick Law Olmsted,<sup>49</sup> William Cronon,<sup>50</sup> and others.

All these show that home, as a form of social organization that separated humans from apes in remote antiquity, still has eternal charm despite being repeatedly surpassed and overwhelmed as civilizations, especially modernization, advance. In a sense, the emerging ecological revolution could be seen as an effort to rebuild a "home" where heaven, earth, humans, and "material entities" will coexist and bond through a new type of partnership. A new ecology of home is emerging.

47 John Bellamy Foster 约贝 佛斯特, *Shengtai geming: yu diqiu heping xiangchu* 生态革命: 与地球和平相处, trans. Liu Rensheng 刘仁胜 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe [People's Publishing House], 2015), 41–42. Originally published in English as *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).

48 Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 86–120.

49 See Frederick Law Olmsted, *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscape*, ed. S. B. Sutton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). In various writings, Olmsted suggested that a true civilized city was supposed to be a home that integrated humans and the rest of nature.

50 Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground*, 23–56, 69–90. See also William Cronon, "Landscape and Home: Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 74 (Winter 1990–1991).

Humans, no matter where you are, please lower your noble head, put down your bow and arrow, and dedicate endless warmth and understanding to the partner—nature—that your life relies on. We have to remember that we can be giants, but we can never leave the earth that gives birth to us. We are nothing but clay people in the big earth family. We come from the earth, and will go back to it eventually.

Let's go home.

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All around us, we see the devastating results of humans' exploitative and adversarial relationship to nature. But what if there were other ways to imagine this relationship? Can we think of the human/nature relationship as a marriage—not free from conflict, but as partners in a shared endeavor? Can we imagine humans and nature sharing the same “home”? What can we learn from traditional Chinese ecological wisdom in this regard? Drawing on myth, philosophy, cosmology, and history, Xia examines environmental and ecological thinking in China and the West, proposing an approach to “ecological history” that offers new ways of thinking ourselves back into nature—or back home.



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ISSN 2190-5088