

Chinese Cosmology and the Environment

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A few years ago I was part of a group treated to a large feast, hosted by the Gansu provincial government. The group at my table immediately scanned through the list of dishes to see what we could look forward to. I was struck by something called “winter insect summer grass,” which I took to be one of those strangely evocative metaphorical names that you sometimes see on a Chinese menu, like “ants climbing trees” for a dish of ground pork and noodles. My Chinese hosts, however, told me there was no metaphor at all. We would be eating something that really was an insect in winter and a grass in summer, and a rare and expensive delicacy as well. They knew little else about the biology of this oddity, but they knew a lot about its Chinese medical properties, which they said were powerfully fortifying. Indeed, they explained, the great success of the Chinese national swim team was due in large part to its special diet, which included this very dish.

As I later learned, we were eating a caterpillar that has been parasitized by a fungus, sometimes called *yartsa* (after the Tibetan name for it) in English, or just *caterpillar fungus*. The fungus devours the caterpillar during a winter hibernation period underground and then sends up a grass-like shoot in the spring. The dish I ate looked like a lonely caterpillar floating in a bowl of clear broth, and did not taste too much like medicine at all.

Gathered in the western highlands of China, especially Tibetan areas like the Qinghai Plateau, its huge market demand has made it a major source of income in some very poor regions. Like many of the most medically powerful foods, caterpillar fungus crosses both physical boundaries (from Tibetan mountains to a swim team in Beijing) and mental ones. Is it alive or dead, animal or vegetable? As I will discuss, caterpillar fungus is just one small example of the old Chinese idea of a universe built around the varied flow of energetic force—*qi*—that characterizes all of both the natural and human worlds. It shows just how much, even today, earlier Chinese understandings of nature with close ties to religion continue to influence life. Here it takes shape in the bizarre biology of the caterpillar fungus in a way that affects both human diet and the environment and economy of the harvesting areas.

Let me offer another example, quite different from the first, of how intertwined ideas about religion and nature continue to influence the environment today. It involves a common goddess rather than exotic food, and environmental protest rather than medical effects on the body, but it also shows the continuing role of earlier ideas about religion and nature. One of Taiwan's earliest large environmental protests was a three-year battle in the city of Kaohsiung to prevent construction of a new naphtha cracker (a kind of light oil refinery, typically very polluting). In 1990, toward the end of the struggle, the government—which supported construction and felt confident of victory—decided to hold a referendum in which neighborhood residents could choose whether to come to a compromise or to oppose the factory completely. The night before the vote, opponents gathered in a local temple, where they made offerings to the god. As incense piled up in the large burner in front of the temple, it burst into a huge spout of flames. A huge crowd gathered as people heard of this sign of divine presence. Eventually the goddess Guanyin possessed the body of a woman in the crowd. Shaking with the power of the possession, surrounded by the smoke and smell of the incense and the large crowd, the goddess announced that the neighborhood was doomed if the factory were to be built. The opponents carried the day in the referendum, and everyone credited the events of the previous night.

These stories illustrate two simple points. First, they indicate that Chinese understandings of both nature and religion can be quite different from what we see in Europe or North America. Second, those ideas continue to shape China's lived environment today, even after a century of globalization. In the pages that follow I will offer a brief overview of Chinese ideas about the relations between humans and their environment as seen through the various religious traditions. I will then move on to more recent times to show how those ideas have interacted with broadly influential and very different concepts coming in from the West.

The Heritage

All of China's varied religious heritages addressed the environment in one way or another.¹ Let me begin with the idea of an "anthropocosmic" world, which had its closest ties to Daoism but spread far beyond any specific religious realm into the broader culture.² Anthropocosmism refers to a complex set of ideas that we might sum up very simply and briefly through the common Chinese reference to the "unity of heaven and humanity." *Tian*, the word usually translated as "heaven" in that phrase, is now more often translated as "nature"—a combination that should remind us that we are dealing with a concept that has no exact equivalents in English and Chinese. *Tian* refers to all the forces that shape the cosmos, and it was treated with great respect. The phrase as a whole, however, reminds us that humans are a part of that great order, that we share in the unity of the world, and that we have a special place within it. All things in that anthropocosmos share at their most

fundamental levels a flow of cosmic energy (*qi*) that shapes everything—from the physical landscape of mountains and streams to the biological one of plants, animals and humans. This *qi* energy itself comes in endless variants, often classified into *yin* and *yang* or into China's traditional Five Phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water). These concepts are discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

Within this image of unity, however, most people felt that the system should be guided for human benefit. Nothing is wrong with using *qi* to create a better life, although disaster can come from going against the Way of the universe. This is exactly what happens when a fengshui expert adjusts a house or a grave to benefit a family by using his ability to discern the energetic qualities of individual clients, the physical and built environment, and the time (see chapter 2). We see it as well in other uses of space, like the typical location of important pilgrimage sites in high mountains (with a powerful energetic flow), the fascination with landscape paintings in which the sinuous flow of *qi* is clearly visible in the shape of a mountain range, or in the Chinese collection of “strange rocks,” which make the flow of *qi* clearly visible on their surfaces.

The oddness of an object often indicates its unusual or powerful *qi*—this can be a person, like the legendary Daoist hermits who appear as grotesque beggars, or it can be an object, like a strange rock. The same is true of the foods that have the most powerful Chinese medicinal properties or that are most in demand. Like the caterpillar fungus with which I began this essay, they almost always come from the geographic periphery (Tibetan highlands, in this case) or the cognitive periphery (between living and dead, grass and insect). Think, for example, of the Chinese demand for rhinoceros horn or pangolin (a scaly, tree-climbing anteater from the

BOX 7.1 Sacred Mountains and Sacred Landscapes

An idea of empowered landscapes grows directly out of a view of the universe in which everything is charged with different qualities of *qi* energy. Powerful energies concentrate in certain spaces in ways that affect nearby humans. Fengshui deals with this on the small scale of buildings and graves, but no one needs a fengshui expert to tell them that some landscapes are particularly sacralized. The ultimate of this kind of thing in China appeared in the idea of sacred mountains. As most people count them, China has five Daoist and four Buddhist sacred mountains. There is something about these spaces that attracted China's great religions, and each of these peaks became home to temples and monasteries that were important pilgrimage sites, including world-renowned centers of martial arts like the temples of Mt. Wudang or the Shaolin Monastery on Mt. Song. Associations between mountains and spirits appear in some of the earliest Chinese texts, and many emperors made personal pilgrimages up some of them. The idea of sacred mountains was just as important in culturally Tibetan areas, where they are often associated with pre-Buddhist deities and people come to circumambulate the peaks.

southwestern mountains). Even the foods of everyday life, however, have medicinal properties, and eating is one of the areas in which it is still easy to see these ideas about nature in action every day.

It is important to recall that these ideas imply a great respect for the dynamics of the anthropocosmic universe but are not at all the same as a Western biocentric ideal of respecting nature over human wishes. The devouring of endangered species, for example, which has greatly increased as China grew wealthier, comes directly from the anthropocosmic understanding of what makes a food desirable. We should recall also that Chinese have tended to deforest their land, not just in the previous century (when the problem became especially severe), but for many centuries before that. More positively, however, these ideas have allowed Chinese to transform their lived environment for millennia while still achieving high levels of productivity. There is no more man-made landscape, for example, than a rice paddy, which flattens every slope and redirects every stream. Yet this new and “artificial” ecosystem has also proved to be robust and stable over long periods.

These ideas that I have briefly outlined were only one of the resources that Chinese culture offered for thinking about nature.³ Both Buddhist and Confucian teachings also had important implications for human relations with the environment. Buddhism adapted itself to Chinese culture in many ways but still added important new ideas. For thinking about the relationship to the environment, three core Buddhist principles stand out in particular.

BOX 7.2 Chinese Gardens and Landscapes

By late imperial times elite gardens had become showcases for the flow of *qi*. Making a garden resembled painting a landscape: neither process just imitated nature, but instead created a new flow of *qi* in the world in an act as creative as the one that created a natural landscape. These gardens thus often favored gnarled trees whose growth patterns revealed their history of life energy. Most valued were strange rocks, pierced with holes and strongly textured after millennia of under-water erosion. The skeletal web of stone that remained was said to show the flow of *qi* in a way that a “fat” rock could not. In some cases, elite gardens constructed “fake mountains,” with paths through piled boulders where friends could wander and imagine themselves as Daoist immortals on cloud-draped peaks. In some ways this represented an aesthetic and elite version of the anthropocosmic understanding of stones that we also see when people burn incense for unusual ones in temples. Many of these elite ideals have become much more widely available to the general public, and this kind of aesthetics of *qi* is no longer limited to a thin upper crust of society. Some of those old elite gardens are now public spaces, for instance, and can still be visited—Suzhou is especially famous for them. In other cases, middle-class families can afford many of the same kinds of objects, even if the scale is reduced to decorating the front room instead of constructing an elaborate garden.



FIGURE 7.1 *Terraced rice paddies (Huang Ping/Photobase/FOTOE)*

First, Buddhists valued life in all its forms, and this showed up most obviously in the prohibition against killing sentient creatures. Devout Buddhists thus ate a strictly vegetarian diet. Second, this prohibition ties to broader ideas about karma and reincarnation. Buddhism aims to allow its followers to give up all attachments to this world, to cease producing the karma that leads to reincarnation, and thus to achieve nirvana. This can encourage both a respect for other beings—human or animal—because they could be people one had known or could be one's own future. Even more important in recent times, the idea of reducing desires and connections in this world encourages a general ideal of simplicity, a minimizing of consumption that adapts easily to environmental concerns. Third, the ideal of the bodhisattva, which became particularly influential in China's Buddhist traditions, held up the model of a being who could achieve nirvana as a Buddha, but chose instead to remain attached to this world until all other sentient beings could achieve enlightenment. This ideal encourages broad goals of caring, which in modern times sometimes extend to the environment as a whole.

The Confucian tradition is long and complex, but it includes several aspects directly relevant to the environment. First, China's rulers from very early times recognized some basic environmental principles, and so we have texts telling people not to hunt juvenile animals or later laws against land reclamation where it could lead to flooding. Probably more important than these piecemeal recognitions of environmental consequences, however, was the general conviction that the Confucian state was responsible for the welfare of its people. Environmental disaster was one of the signs of misrule, and

people blamed an emperor whose reign was filled with floods or droughts for having lost the “mandate of heaven” and thus the right to rule. The result was a long history of attempts at environmental control and regulation, although such attempts often achieved only very limited success. It is important to recognize that Chinese greatly altered their environment from the beginning, in some cases with clear negative long-term consequences, as with the deforestation that occurred in many areas, and that such Confucian principles could not always override short-term economic incentives.

There were many Chinese ways of thinking about nature by late imperial times, but none of these important themes I have mentioned was close to what had become the dominant paradigm in the West: the assumed contrast between nature and culture, between a nonhuman environment and a world of human artifice. Nor was it a view of humans humbly submitting themselves to a broader order of nature, a view that also separates the natural from the cultural. Instead, nearly every Chinese view included some aspect of understanding and working with the broad flow of the universe for the benefit of humanity. Like any view of the world, this had consequences for the environment. It led to ecologically quite stable but also completely man-made agricultural environments like rice paddies, with their careful terracing of the land and precise manipulation of water. The intimate connection in some parts of China among rice cultivation, fishponds, and silkworm production is another remarkable achievement in balanced resource use. However, we should not romanticize these views; they also encouraged consumption of endangered species and sometimes irresponsible exploitation of the land.

New Environmental Ideas and Globalization

Much changed as China came into increasing contact with Western thinking about nature from the late nineteenth century on. The modern Chinese word for nature (*ziran*) took on this meaning only around the very end of the nineteenth century. Like many new Western ideas, the Chinese borrowed a term that the Japanese had coined to translate Western texts. The term is actually an old Chinese term; Daoists particularly used it to refer to the intrinsic spontaneity of the Dao itself. Yet the term took on the idea of “nature” as the nonhuman world, the opposite of culture, only as part of this new exercise in global translation. By the early part of the twentieth century, this new view of how humans relate to the environment had come to dominate intellectual and policy circles in China.

The discourse of nature in Europe and North America by the end of the nineteenth century was already complex. Some voices championed a developmentalist emphasis on human control over the environment, celebrated through feats like railroads, canals, and dams. There was, however, also a complex reaction that tried to reclaim the value of nature in ways that varied from the Romantic movement to John Muir and the American origins of national parks. All of these views entered China, but the developmentalist paradigm dominated. Perhaps its greatest modern

symbol in China, the enormous Three Gorges dam, originated in the developmental vision of Sun Yat-sen, even though its construction had to await the twenty-first century. Textbooks for modern education abandoned early Chinese categories for thinking about nature in favor of Western scientific ones. They also began to feature new kinds of slogans, like “Man Must Conquer Nature!” which appears in both Communist and Nationalist campaigns. At least at the level of the political elites who made policy and wrote textbooks, early anthropocosmic, Buddhist, and Confucian views of nature had been given up in favor of one particular Western view—the strong developmentalism without the voices for the embrace of nature that also existed in the West at the time.

This new, globalized understanding of nature became an important part of the antireligious attitudes that all Chinese governments showed throughout the twentieth century. Deeply committed to their own images of “modernity,” both the Nationalist and Communist governments used environmental arguments to oppose much religion. They harangued against cemeteries as a waste of good land, against food offerings to gods or ancestors as a waste of money and a danger to health, and against burning paper spirit money as a source of pollution. Fengshui lost its standing in court as a legal argument (except, ironically, in the former British colony of Hong Kong). Even a word like *dili* (“the order of the earth”), which originally referred to the cosmic geomantic balances of fengshui, came to mean simply “geography” in the Western sense of an insensate physical world by the early twentieth century.

Only much later in the twentieth century do we begin to see the more pro-nature side of the Western nature/culture divide take on significance for Chinese intellectuals and policy makers. We see it first in Taiwan. The new valuation of nature extends back only to some tenuous beginnings in the late 1970s, like a bird-watching club or groups of college students who would hike in the mountains on weekends. As more political space opened up in the 1980s, however, Taiwan soon sprouted an active environmental movement, which boasted some impressive victories, like blocking construction of a DuPont titanium dioxide plant in Lukang in 1985. By the end of the decade, the island also saw its first national parks, along with more entrepreneurial nature appreciation like glossy nature magazines or private nature tourism sites.

Many of the same things occurred in the People’s Republic about a decade later, when we also saw the development of bird-watching clubs, environmental NGOs, local environmental protests, and increased nature tourism. China, of course, had not shared Taiwan’s move to democratic politics, which has given activities in the People’s Republic of China a more careful and less politicized emphasis. Nevertheless, we can see some people in both Chinese societies embracing a more positive view of nature and moving away from the developmentalist paradigm toward the end of the twentieth century.⁴

There are several points worth noting about these twentieth-century changes. First, neither the developmentalist discourse nor the nature appreciation relies

much on earlier Chinese understandings of how people relate to the environment. Instead, they form part of competing global discourses with roots in the post-Enlightenment Western sundering of nature from culture. They vary, however, in which side of the nature/culture divide they prefer. In this, they are very similar to people advancing related arguments in the West. Second, most of these recent changes in the view of the environment were insistently secular. Unlike earlier Chinese views of how humans relate to the world beyond them, which were tied closely to religious ideas, these new ideas claimed legitimacy in science and economics. Finally, we should recall that the most powerful voices promoting the new views were the educated, urban elite. When we look beyond the worlds of politicians and intellectuals, we see a much more complex embrace of both global visions and the legacy of Chinese thinking about the environment, as I will discuss next.

Current Trends in Religion and Environment

The history of China's thinking about the environment in the twentieth century and beyond looks different as soon as we move beyond official media such as policy pronouncements and school textbooks. The new global ideas about nature have had a widespread influence, but they have not replaced earlier ideas so much as added another layer of possibility for people thinking about how to relate to the broader world. When we examine general views in the population instead of just the strongly secular official discourse about nature, we again see the centrality of religious ideas.⁵

For example, the anthropocosmic understanding of the world—that largely rejects the opposition between nature and culture—continues unabated. We can see this first of all in the robust revival of fengshui in much of China. Recent studies have shown how widespread the practice continues to be in many rural areas.⁶ In other Chinese societies in which fengshui did not suffer the same political repression, the practice has thrived continuously. Fengshui compasses are widely available, and bookstores are filled with manuals describing how to do it yourself. At least according to rumor, even top Chinese officials rely on fengshui to site important new buildings. The most famous case is the Bank of China building in Hong Kong, whose sharp angles were said to be designed to cut through the fengshui forces that had supported the British governor's mansion and its colonial rule. The idea that a flow of *qi* unites both the social and natural worlds thus remains widespread. In some cases, we still see fengshui ideas brought into local arguments about the built environment.

Nature and culture intertwine again in the sacralization of stones or trees that we see under some circumstances. In parts of China we can still see “fengshui groves,” where trees are left in order to protect the fengshui of a site like a cemetery. Beyond that, parts of China are continuing an old tradition of worshipping remarkable bits of the natural world, like ancient or enormous trees or stones that may

exhibit strange properties. I first saw this on the mainland in rural Guangxi province, where some local cadres had taken me to the local scenic mountain for a bit of nature tourism. To my surprise and their dismay, however, it turned out to be a festival day for a temple on top of the mountain, and there were worshippers everywhere. Most remarkable to me was the path up the mountain, where the ground everywhere sprouted sticks of burning incense, carefully placed at the base of nearly every large tree and boulder. Burning incense is an act of respect, typically done for an ancestor or deity. Here the respect was for the natural power of the mountain itself—not as pure nature but as a powerful force that shapes the human world, just like a deity.

Taiwan also has a similar tradition, and it is not unusual to find remarkable stones worshipped in their own temples, sometimes draped in robes like a more standard deity (most of whom are the spirits of dead humans). As a typical example, one such temple in northern Taiwan centered on a large stone that blocked a rural path. A farmwoman moved it to the side and went on about her business. Strangely, however, it was back again the next day, and again the day after that. Thinking that there might be some special power in the stone, the woman burned some incense and asked the stone for help in a dispute with her neighbor. This apparently worked out well, and word spread about the efficacy of the stone. More signs of efficacy eventually led to construction of the temple. As with fengshui, we can see the continuing power of ideas that see nature and culture together—here as a stone living in a building and wearing human clothing—without the separation between them that usually typifies global and Chinese official talk about the environment.

BOX 7.3 Pilgrimage and Nature Tourism

It is not a coincidence that many of China's most important traditional pilgrimage sites are now also nature tourism sites. Bird watching competes with incense burning in many places. In fact, it may be a mistake to think of pilgrimage and tourism as separate kinds of activities in the Chinese context. Descriptions of late imperial pilgrimage sites regularly include rhapsodies about natural beauties and strange atmospheric effects in addition to temples and worshippers. One pilgrimage I joined in Taiwan, for instance, visited all the important temples to the goddess Mazu on the island and ended up at a nature reserve (now a national park) at the end. Bus tour services in Taiwan today trace their roots to pilgrimages of several decades ago and say that people booking nature tourism now always also visit nearby temples. Why the connection? Because in both cases people seek to experience a kind of anthropocosmic power, where the same flows of energy that shape a landscape also nurture divine power. Nature and culture (or religion, in this case) have not been severed from each other, unlike the implied contrast in English between nature *tourism* and *pilgrimage*.

Perhaps the most obvious place to find these views, however, is at the dinner table. Food everywhere, of course, is one of the points where environment and society mesh most closely. In the Chinese context all food has qualities based on the particularities of its *qi*. In folk classifications of food, this usually takes the form of distinctions between “hot” and “cold” foods, which refers to their effects on the body, rather than their physical temperature or spiciness. In this sense, Chinese traditional medicines are just extreme foods, ones whose medical effects are especially concentrated and potent. Powerful foods like caterpillar fungus are an extreme, but every food has these qualities, and every informant can describe the health effects of a wide variety of foods. Most people are also aware of some basic herbal remedies and will go to a traditional Chinese pharmacist for certain kinds of illness. At the point where the environment strikes us most intimately, that is with the things we incorporate from outside our bodies like food and medicine, most people in Chinese societies continue to rely on modes of thinking about nature that long predate global influences.

We can also see more directly religious action on the environment that owes little to imported notions of culture versus nature. The most common religious activities in China center around local temples, which often have no larger institutional organization and are run directly by the people of the village or town, rather than by any religious hierarchy of priests. At the most local level, these temples are one of the only ties that bring villagers together socially for joint activities and to create a common identity. The only other major mechanism like that, in some villages, is the lineage (which also had a strong religious aspect), as described in chapter 2.

It should thus not be particularly surprising that when villagers perceive an environmental threat to their health or economy, temples often play an important organizing role. The most usual cases involve severe air pollution that is clearly causing discomfort, especially among children or near schools, or water pollution suspected of damaging agricultural production like fishponds or irrigated crops. In the case of the Taiwanese protest against construction of a naphtha cracker, which I described earlier, residents complained of existing refineries that left a visible and flammable oil scum on their water, as well as severe air and noise pollution. The temple was an obvious place to organize people, because it already had the means to bring people together through its own rituals.

We can see a different sort of Taiwanese example in the annual festival for the hungry ghosts. Traditionally held in the seventh lunar month, this elaborate ritual involves temples organizing their communities and hiring priests to appease all the hungry ghosts who invade the world of the living at that time (see chapter 2). Although it originally had no direct connection to the environment, some Taiwanese areas (led by Taipei County), beginning in the 1980s, borrowed the symbolism to raise environmental consciousness. Hungry ghosts are people with no one to worship their lost souls, whose anger can cause them to make us sick. It was not such a big step for the organizers of these new-style festivals to say that the environment had been neglected in just the same way, leading to the same sorts of negative consequences for those who had caused the death of the island's rivers and streams.

All communities still celebrate the festival in its traditional ways, but the new environmental message has also become common.

This sort of thing is not possible on the mainland for political reasons. Nevertheless, localized environmental protest has occurred frequently, and temples sometimes play an important symbolic or organizing role, just as in Taiwan. One village in the northwestern province of Gansu, for example, protested pollution of the Yellow River by a nearby fertilizer company.⁷ The key organizing elements were the temple to Confucius (this was a lineage of people who traced their ancestry to him) and several temples dedicated to fertility goddesses. This was the 1980s, when the birth control campaign was at its harshest, and the ability to raise one healthy and filial child was a great concern for people. That was the symbolic link that united water pollution, fertility goddesses, and local villagers concerned with what they saw as a health threat to their irreplaceable children.

Land use disputes are another issue that sometimes leads people to organize through local religion. In many areas these take place around the displacements caused when the government builds highways or dams, or when cities raze residential areas to build more profitable developments. Religion itself can sometimes be the main issue of dispute, especially among those minority groups that consider some lands inviolable, like the Tibetan sacred mountains. These issues have sometimes put people at odds both with local governments that want to develop “underutilized” land and sometimes with foreign tourists who want to climb the peaks without showing proper respect.

Some local temples have also begun to reexamine their own environmental practices. In particular, they have been trying to mitigate the effects of burning incense and paper spirit money. Each individual worshipper contributes only a little pollution by burning a few sticks of incense and a stack of the spirit money, but the cumulative effect can be enormous, sending massive quantities of heavy particulates into the air, along with smaller amounts of chemical pollutants. Large festival days send huge clouds of smoke wafting over towns, and the largest temple centers will burn several tons of spirit money in a day. In response, there has been a recent trend, especially in Taiwan and Hong Kong, to introduce more efficient incense burners and spirit money incinerators. By burning more efficiently and at higher temperatures, these methods can greatly reduce pollution.

The more institutionalized traditional religions, especially Buddhism, have also been actively rethinking their role in the environment. The most important line of thought has grown out of the “humanistic Buddhism” tradition. This was an early twentieth-century attempt to reconcile Buddhism and modernity by stressing the bodhisattva idea I mentioned earlier—the need to help all living beings in the world. The environment was not a high priority for Taixu or the other leading monks who first developed these ideas, but it became very important when this tradition found new life in Taiwan at the end of the century.

One of the most active and important of these new Buddhist organizations is the Compassion Relief Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) Foundation (see chapters 6 and 8). The original goal

of the foundation was to support itself through productive work rather than performing rituals in exchange for donations. Instead, income would be used to make the world a better place. This began with medical care, and the group has now built a medical school and several state-of-the-art hospitals. They soon expanded into other areas, including the environment. Several other global-scale humanistic Buddhist movements arose at about the same time in Taiwan, and all of them also have an environmental aspect to their work.

None of these movements in Taiwan are politically radical, and this is consistent with their largely middle-class membership bases. Instead, they define their environmentalism in Buddhist terms, in part as a concrete example of the bodhisattva ideal, and in part as a way of reducing the grasping greed that locks us into the karmic cycle of suffering and rebirth. That is, simplicity and minimal consumption were already important goals in Buddhist cultivation. The innovation of these new Buddhist groups has been to connect simplicity directly to the environment.

One result is that these new Buddhist groups generally promote environmental reform at the personal and household levels, rather than helping in protest movements or lobbying against government environmental policies. They have been crucial in the success of grassroots recycling programs. Local Compassion Relief branches, for example, typically organize neighborhood recycling programs around the world. We can see this in the actions of one of their branch leaders in Malaysia, who turned his large yard in a wealthy neighborhood into a recycling station. They also urge people to waste fewer resources in their own lives. Thus the founder of Compassion Relief once told me that she uses each sheet of paper three times—first writing in pencil, then in pen, and finally with the heavy ink of a Chinese writing brush. Followers are urged to do things like carry around their own chopsticks to avoid the deforestation that results from disposable chopsticks in restaurants. Buddhists have also introduced flea markets, which had never before been popular in Chinese societies, in order to get more useful life out of objects.

None of the other institutional religions have been nearly as environmentally active as the Buddhists. So far at least, neither Daoists nor Confucians have an institutional base at all comparable to the Buddhists, although Confucianism is undergoing a surge of popularity in China right now, and this could change. They are thus not as well placed to affect environmental behavior, nor have they so far really put strong efforts into it beyond a few piecemeal efforts. Christians outside of China, of course, certainly have been giving serious thought to environmental issues, but it is so far difficult to see much impact from that in Chinese societies.

Conclusion

One of the most notable features that emerges from this brief overview is that we can see little overlap between official environmental policy and any of the older religious traditions. For almost the entire twentieth century, much of the environmental thinking

of intellectuals and nearly all that showed up in government discourse reflected the powerful new influences coming from the West. The idea that human culture stood outside of and in opposition to nature infiltrated everything from development planning to geography textbooks. This was true under all governments: Republican, Communist, and even the Japanese colonial rule of Taiwan. It led to major economic transformations and to equally devastating environmental damage. It was only toward the end of the century that the more environmentalist side of Western thought on nature began to have more of an influence in either China or Taiwan.⁸

In spite of the power of these imported ideas, China's own array of approaches to the relationship between humanity and environment continued to thrive and to influence people's behavior. As I have discussed, ideas about the anthropocosmic world continue to influence diet (and therefore also the landscapes of agriculture), architecture (through fengshui), and broad ways of behaving in the environment. Lines of early conceptions of the environment, like the idea that the heavens (i.e., nature) and humanity are one, continue to offer important resources for thinking about the future. Buddhist ideas about karma, the need to save all beings, and the importance of renouncing greed also continue to evolve and to foster new kinds of environmentalism. These ideas may not dominate policy making, but they certainly influence daily life and the ways policies are actually implemented (or not).

None of China's earlier religious traditions, even in the very new forms some of them are evolving today, have yet had a visible influence on environmental policy in any Chinese society. This is largely because, with the partial exception of some Buddhists, none of them have pulled together a clearly articulated environmental philosophy that can compete directly with the dominant global (and originally Western) discourses of developmentalism on the one hand, and biocentric environmentalism on the other. Rather than developing theoretically coherent and explicit arguments with these dominant influences, the Chinese traditions for the most part have thrived by remaining embedded in the practical contexts of daily life. We see them not in textbooks on environmental thought, but every day at the dinner table and the doctor's office, and at the heart of environmental protest when the situation demands it.

I originally began working on these topics hoping to find an alternative Chinese environmentalism. Except for the beginnings of some new Buddhist thought on the issue, there really is not such an alternative, at least not yet. Instead, global views continue the hegemony they have had for over a century. Yet this is not necessarily unfortunate. In fact, as we have seen, Chinese religious culture offers a wealth of alternative views of nature if we only look beyond the level of abstract argument and examine real behavior in context. What appears to be a weakness in competing on the global intellectual stage is also a strength in maintaining a deep pool of diversity in how we can understand and interact with nature. Instead of reducing a complex and variable set of contextual possibilities to a "Chinese environmentalism," we retain a living pool of ideas. This is as crucial in human culture as it is in a gene pool or an ecological system, where diversity is the best tool for adapting to a changing world.

Notes

1. We are fortunate to have several recent edited collections dealing specifically with the environmental teachings and implications of China's traditional religions, as part of the Religions of the World and Ecology series (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1998). The most relevant books for Chinese societies include John Berthrong and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1998); Norman J. Girardot, James Miller, and Xiaogan Liu, eds., *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2001); and Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryukan Williams, editors, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1998).

2. The term *anthropocosmic* comes from Wei-ming Tu, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature," in *On Nature*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 113–129.

3. Much more could be pulled out of the Daoist tradition, of course. See, for example, the essays in Norman J. Girardot, James Miller, and Xiaogan Liu, eds., *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2001).

4. The depth of China's current environmental problems has led to a number of very useful studies of environmental conditions and policies in China, although they tend to downplay cultural and religious factors. For policy in general, see the collection of articles published in Richard Louis Edmonds, ed., *Managing the Chinese Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), or the recent study by Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005). Judith Shapiro has written a very useful history of environmental policy in the People's Republic, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Vaclav Smil was a pioneer in studies of China's environment and wrote many useful books, including, for example, *China's Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993). It is worth remembering, of course, that the situation in China changes so fast that almost anything is out of date by the time it is published.

5. There are fewer studies so far on culture and the environment at the most local levels, but more should be coming out. The most useful recent work on fengshui in China is Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination Between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003). A good grassroots view of local protest appears in Jun Jing, "Environmental Protests in Rural China," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Mark Selden and Elizabeth J. Perry (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 197–214. Broader analyses of Chinese culture, religion, and economy can be found in Chris Coggins, *The Tiger and the Pangolin: Nature, Culture, and Conservation in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), and in Robert Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China*.

7. See Jun Jing, "Environmental Protests in Rural China."

8. Much more work on Chinese environmental attitudes has begun to appear in the last few years. Environmental history has been an especially lively field in Chinese studies as

well in many other parts of the world. Some of the earlier studies in English include Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Peter C. Perdue, *Exhausting the Earth: State and Peasant in Hunan, 1500–1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987), and R. Keith Schoppa, *Xiang Lake—Nine Centuries of Chinese Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989). Each of these books provides a fine-grained historical case study of interactions between humanity and nature during the late imperial period. Kenneth Pomeranz offers a rather different kind of environmental history in his book *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). This book is a broad consideration of how natural resources related to the development of a modern economy, including a general reconsideration of the relationships between economy and environmental resources in China. Mark Elvin has also published a broad-ranging consideration of imperial Chinese ideas about nature: *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).