

CHINESE TRADITIONS AND ECOLOGY: SURVEY ARTICLE

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Abstract

The increasing degradation of the natural environment, and the associated dangers to all life on the planet, very well might represent the greatest challenge to humankind. In response to such projections of impending danger, scholars and activists from a variety of fields are in the midst of investigating cultural resources as a means to understand both how humans went wrong and how humans can amend the damage. Out of this inquiry has emerged a vast body of literature exploring the various intersections between Chinese traditions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, Feng-Shui and folk practice; and the natural environment, ecology, and environmental ethics. This paper is a survey of this literature, seen through the lens of religious studies and ecology. Rather than offer critical evaluation of the field, this essay is meant to offer a broad survey of the material presented in an accessible manner as a tool for those new to, but interested in pursuing, this field of study. This paper is, therefore a guide.

Keywords: Religion, Ecology, China, Confucianism, Daoism, Feng-Shui, folk practice, Environmental Ethics

Introduction

The idea that Eastern religious traditions might be able to assist in healing apparent rifts between humans and nature is hardly new. As long ago as 1956, Alan Watts, drawing upon Eastern traditions in *Nature, Man and Woman*, professed the inseparability of humans from nature. Lynn White also famously suggested in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (1967) that Eastern religious traditions might offer antidotes to the environmentally destructive trajectories of Judaism and Christianity; while Huston Smith in “Tao Now: An Ecological Testament” (1972), maintained that Chinese traditional attitudes toward nature might serve as tools for expanding the West’s environmental awareness. Indeed, since the 1970s, the discipline of religious studies has witnessed an explosion of literature examining the possible interconnections between world religions and ecological thought. By 1991 the area was sufficiently developed that the American Academy of Religion granted group status to the Religion and Ecology

Group. A series of conferences on religion and ecology at Harvard University during the mid-1990s led to the formation of the Forum on Religion and Ecology; these conferences, and the Forum, gave birth to the book series on World Religions and Ecology (1997-2004).

However, the project of relating religious traditions to the current perception of “environmental crisis” is by no means a straightforward one, as all the papers in this collection make clear. One central question raised by turning to Eastern traditions to help with global problems concerns whether it is possible for a religious tradition to function properly outside its context of origination or primary practice. In *Other People's Myths*, Wendy Doniger, for example, expresses suspicion about the ability of a religion to function outside its traditional cultural contexts. To what extent, for example, is it possible to be a Daoist or a Buddhist in California, as opposed to Asia? According to Doniger, although the possibility exists, the tradition in question does not remain the same as in its original context. This does not mean though, on Doniger's account, that the tradition is any less “authentic” for the California Daoist than it is for the Chinese Daoist (Doniger 1988).

While Doniger is concerned with the ability of a practitioner from one culture to “authentically” practice another culture's religion, religion scholar Gerald Larson expresses concern over the *selective use* of religious traditions. For Larson, such action amounts to little more than the extraction of “resources” for one's own purposes in a way no less problematic than colonialism. However, Larson does acknowledge the possibility of using another culture's traditions to illuminate contemporary issues through conversation and not extraction (Larson 1987). While neither of these scholars completely rejects seeking aid and support from “other people's” cultural and religious traditions—as is common in work on religion and ecology—their work alerts scholars in this area to worries they should keep in mind.

While acknowledging these notes of caution, Western scholars are increasingly turning to the religious traditions of the world in their search for ways of mitigating the ever-escalating global ecological crisis. For many, turning to Daoism, or any other unfamiliar tradition for that matter, offers fresh perspectives from which to view the world and the human place in it. David Hall in his essay “On Seeking a Change of Environment” (1989) argues that by turning to alternative cultures such as Daoism, one can attain fresh perspectives on one's own environment (Hall 1989: 101). Similarly Tu

Weiming in “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality” (1998a) argues that in the face of the rise of the “global village”, it is only natural that we look to other traditions in search of mutual enrichment, transformation, and restructuring (Weiming 1998: 9). Those putting forward these kinds of views maintain that only by encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and education, by sharing cultural resources, can one overcome cultural divides and create the possibility of more sustainable living globally.

Questions about “appropriation” of traditions, or parts of traditions, into other cultures form just one of the problematic areas of debate in the context of religion and environment. However, having noted this debate, which forms a backdrop to much in the field, I want now to move on to outline the material that will be covered in this paper.

This paper surveys material emerging out of the religious traditions of China—Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese folk religion—in the context of debates about the environment. It seeks to present the bulk of the scholarly material in a clear and coherent form, highlighting the work of what might be called the “heavy hitters” of the field, while simultaneously noting the less well known scholars who have significant contributions to make to the discussions on Chinese religious traditions and ecological thought. I am not planning to offer substantial criticism of this material; the goal here is simply to present the material in an accessible manner as a tool for those new to, but interested in pursuing, this field of study. This paper is a guide. Having said this, it is of course impossible to present no perspective on the material at all; and I have had to be selective in this account. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient room in the body of the text for every article and/book dealing with Chinese religions and ecology and therefore omissions are almost certain to have occurred.

In selecting the material covered in this essay, I have decided to keep the presentation focused on the “indigenous” religions of China: Confucianism, Daoism, Feng-shui, and folk/popular religion. While other world religions clearly play a role in the everyday religious life of China—such as Islam, Christianity, or more notably Buddhism—it is these “indigenous” religions I will primarily be considering. (My colleague Lucas Johnston addresses Chinese Buddhism in this volume; I therefore omit discussion of it here.) This paper will primarily focus on texts central to the religion and ecology discussion. Peripheral

texts on the broader Chinese worldview and symbol systems will only be mentioned when guidance is needed to some of the key texts on Chinese religion and ecology. Finally, there is a significant and growing body of literature on religion and ecology written in Chinese, Korean, and/or Japanese. I want to note the existence of this work but owing to the introductory nature of this review paper, I will confine this study to English-language texts.

The paper is organized in the following way. The first section outlines central arguments in a few of what are widely thought to be the foundational texts broadly dealing with Chinese religions and ecological thinking. The second section turns to Confucianism (on the basis that it predates Daoism). The third section addresses Daoism and ecology, both with and without reference to its Confucian predecessors and contemporaries. The fourth section, one which could equally well sit at the beginning, will discuss writings on Feng-shui and Chinese popular/folk religion. I have placed it at this point in the paper because it provides a nice segue into the discussion of the role of religion in “on-the-ground” environmental action and resistance taking place in China. The last section will present, on one hand, the views of scholars who are critical of the project of investigating Chinese traditions and ecology, and on the other hand, the work of scholars who look at the environmental damage in China itself and ask “If these religious traditions have not stopped any ecological degradation in China, why should they work for anyone else?”

Finally, before turning to the material itself, one final caveat is necessary: This paper is a presentation of various strands of different Chinese religions. Some of the texts I discuss tend to perceive the individual traditions in monolithic terms, while others seek specificity, context, and anchoring within the traditions. It is not my goal to suggest or imply that there is just one single Daoism or Confucianism. Indeed, if there is any intention, it is to demonstrate the multiplicities and complicated nature of each of these traditions in a way that warns incoming scholars against falling into the traps of monolithic thinking.

Chinese Religions Generally Conceived

It is only fitting to begin this discussion with the work of one of the most influential scholars in the field, Mary Evelyn Tucker, who has

written extensively on the subject of world religions and ecology, Chinese religions, and specifically on Confucianism. Under the guidance of Tucker, and her husband John Grim, the Forum for Religion and Ecology was founded. From this Forum came the central texts of this study: *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within A Cosmic Landscape* (2001) and *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (1998). In the foundational text *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the West* (1994), Mary Evelyn Tucker presents an introductory essay “Ecological Themes in Taoism and Confucianism”. Though suggesting many reasons for caution—such as concerns about ignoring everyday practice or context, and “risking generalizations that need qualification and development”, Tucker proceeds to give a solid general introduction to the issues raised by thinking about Chinese religions in the context of the environmental crisis. “While Taoism and Confucianism are quite different in their specific teachings,” she writes, “they share a worldview that might be described as organic, vitalistic, and holistic” (1994: 152). Both traditions, she maintains, see the universe as a dynamic, ongoing, process of continual transformation. This worldview, according to Tucker, is one from which the West can learn on issues concerning the human relationship not just to the Earth, but to the entire cosmos.

Another foundational essay in setting up the discussion of Chinese religious traditions in the context of environmental problems is cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s important 1967 essay “Discrepancies between Environmental Attitude and Behavior: Examples from Europe and China”. On one hand, Tuan notes the abundance of “environmentally friendly” beliefs in the religious and cultural traditions of China. On the other hand, he points out that the actual practices of the Chinese have hardly lived up to the ideal expressed in their traditions. Further, he notes, China’s history of environmental degradation long predates that of Western technological or industrial influences. By noting this history of environmental destruction, Yi-Fu Tuan offers a solid counter to Lynn White’s attempt to blame the West for contemporary ecological ills. In addition, Tuan’s point also brings to light central questions concerning the relation of practice to belief.

Economist T.N. Jenkins, in “Chinese Traditional Thought and Practice: Lessons for an Ecological Economics Worldview” (2001), while evaluating aspects of Chinese worldviews—in particular Confucian, Daoist, and folk traditions that might hold a few positive

lessons for sustainable living—nonetheless shares Tuan's hesitations concerning possible disconnects between belief and practice. Jenkins—who draws on economics, Chinese concepts of continuity, dynamism of the universe, and flow—suggests that these may provide useful models for pragmatic economic philosophy which allows the individual to see him or herself as a larger part of both the social and environmental fabric of the world. "Systemic interconnectedness" he maintains "as it is understood in the Chinese worldview, suggests the importance of both continual resource recycling and preservation of social and ecological flexibility through diverse economic structures" (2001: 50). In addition, Jenkins' essay offers an excellent and accessible overview of the key points of each tradition.

Before getting into the detailed, tradition-oriented material, it is, lastly, helpful to familiarize oneself with a few general texts on Chinese history and symbolism. Several often appear on the maps of scholarship in this field. Most frequently referred to is the insightful and poetic text by Sarah Allen: *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue* (1997). Allan maintains that "The natural world was the source of the root metaphors in the formulation of abstract concepts and its imagery is embedded in the language and structure of Chinese philosophy" (1997: 3). Equally quoted and helpful is Charles Le Blanc and Susan Blader's wide-ranging edited volume *Chinese Ideas About Nature In Society* (1987). These two texts between them provide a sound, if basic, understanding of Chinese symbolism of the natural world.

Finally Julia Ching's *Chinese Religions* (1993), provides a useful survey of the history of Chinese religions. Prefacing her book with the view that the Chinese had no term for "religion" until the late nineteenth century (when it arose from European influence) Ching presents a wide-ranging outline of the histories of Chinese religions through cults, doctrines, key figures, and "religious" traditions. Not only does she deal with Confucianism and Daoism, but she devotes equal attention to divination and ancestral cults, sacrificial practices and kingship ritual in Antiquity, mysticism, and Buddhism; and she considers the influences of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in China. The breadth of this text, especially in its attention to religious traditions predating Confucianism, signals many directions that scholarship on religion and ecology could take, moving beyond the current focus on Confucianism, Daoism, and folk religion. Unfortunately, however, at the present time further research on this material has

not yet been undertaken, although we may hope that this situation will change in future. Such diverse traditions may provide interesting contributions to understanding the possible relationships between humans, nature, and culture.

Confucianism

Confucianism has traditionally been described as a humanistic tradition, emphasizing the roles and positions of humans in relation to family, society, and government. Most commonly then, Confucianism is regarded as a political system of thought, based on texts such as the *Book of Rites (Liji)* and the works of Mencius and Xunzi. This political focus has often led Confucianism to be regarded as anthropocentric; and due to this, the role Confucianism might play in environmental thought is somewhat contested.

Anthropocosmism in Confucianism

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an animate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

—Chan Tsai

Again, we begin this section with the work of Mary Evelyn Tucker. Tucker's essays "Confucianism" and "Confucianism and Environmental Ethics", in the recent *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), offer concise but thorough introductions to both the Confucian tradition broadly perceived and the tradition's connections to ecological thought. Central to her discussion is the Confucian idea of an "anthropocosmic" worldview that sees "humans as working together with Heaven and Earth in correlative relationships to create harmonious societies" (2005: 263). In other words, anthropocosmism is a cosmological position that places humans as active agents and equal partners with Heaven, Earth, and all of its inhabitants, a view that Tucker argues may contain the possibility for greater global egalitarianism.

Chinese scholar Tu Weiming presents a similar line of argument in his essay "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature"

(1998b). In this essay, he investigates the implications of Chinese understandings of the creation of the universe for an environmental ethic. Highlighting the elements of continuity, dynamism, and wholeness all of which situate the human within the continued creation of the universe along anthropocosmic lines, Tu Weiming argues for an ethic dependent upon the human relation to the cosmos. To see humans as a part of the cosmic process, he argues, provides a powerful counter to the Western, Cartesian dualism of spirit versus matter. As humans and cosmos are connected in one process of continued transformation, this connection should drive humanity to act as the “respectful son or daughter of the cosmic process” (1998b: 113).

Tu Weiming revisits anthropocosmism in his 2001 essay “The Ecological Turn in New Confucianism: Implications for China and the World”. Here he argues that the unitary idea of Heaven and humanity central to anthropocosmism encompasses “four inseparable dimensions of the human condition: self, community, nature, and Heaven. Rather as in a form of “kinship ethics”, Tu Weiming insists that such a worldview requires human ethical responsiveness to a world to which they are related, both materially and spiritually. Finally, another important paper in this context is Phillip Ivanhoe’s “Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics” (1998). Ivanhoe explains anthropocosmism by way of the *Analects*, the earliest primary text available of Confucius’s life and teachings. Ivanhoe uses this text to demonstrate the development of a Confucian anthropocosmic view, which he insists not only provides a solid foundation for environmental ethics, but likewise offers humans opportunities for aesthetic pleasure, metaphysical comfort, and psychical sustenance (1998: 69).

Deep Ecology and Confucianism

Deep ecology has been one of the most important approaches to environmental philosophy; and those working within deep ecological tradition have sometimes turned to Chinese religions as a source of metaphysical, ethical and practical insight. Although deep ecology has a variety of manifestations, one central idea—which appeared in the “founding article” of Deep Ecology, published by Arne Naess in *Inquiry* in 1973—has been that humans should be understood as centrally embedded in, rather than apart from, the natural world.

Developing from this strong sense of embeddedness, some forms of deep ecology embrace an idea of an expanded self, where one sees the boundaries of self extending beyond the physical body. If the self is expanded in this way, then seeking self-realization means seeking something much broader than the realization of one's ego-self. According to Naess, "Self-realization is the goal to recognize one's personhood as tied to the cosmos, in a biocentric fashion. The 'Self' is favored over the 'self'". Thus Self-realization contrasts with self-realization, which is individualistic, solitary, and anthropocentric.

From the Confucian perspective, scholars often view anthropocosmism as in some ways resembling these deep ecological ideas. Mary Evelyn Tucker, for instance, in "Confucianism and Deep Ecology" (2001), not only demonstrates connections between a Confucian worldview and deep ecological philosophy, but attempts to dispel commonly-perceived notions of Confucianism as a religion of social control and political organization. In discussing the lives of several Confucian practitioners—Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714) and Miura Baien (1723-1789)—Tucker outlines the Confucian emphasis on "self cultivation" in relation to the deep ecological goal of "Self-realization", which, as noted above, privileges that which perceives the self in relation and connection to the entire Self of the cosmos. Scholars such as Tucker, then, relate the central motif of anthropocosmism to the deep ecological insistence on Self-realization, recognizing the basis of both in worldviews that see the human as embedded in the larger cosmos, as members of a larger community of life.

Other scholars, though, are less sanguine about what Confucianism may offer to discussions of world religions and deep ecology, due to the perception that Confucianism is primarily a religion of social control and stratification. (Indeed, my research suggests that the widely held nature of this view explains why Daoism is the more favored and widely discussed of the Chinese traditions in this context.) Huey-li Li, for instance, wonders about the efficacy of Confucian anthropocosmism in coping with or reversing environmental destruction, as well as social injustices. Echoing the arguments of those who have criticized kinship ethics, she insists that relationship to something does not always necessitate ethical treatment. Even recognition of the close interconnected reality of humans to the cosmos, she states, "need not support an environmental ethic but rather could sanction large-scale transformation of the natural environment for the pursuit of social perfectibility" (Li 1998: 295). Because, she argues,

Confucianism at root seeks social control, it is a tradition with a history of female oppression. And, she notes, as ecofeminists have pointed out, a connection can be made between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. In the end, Li expresses skepticism about the ability of Confucianism to be considered as an “eco-friendly” tradition, both historically and today. J. Baird Callicott, author of *Earth’s Insights* (1994), a wide-ranging text exploring environmental ethics in a variety of world traditions and religions, is likewise cautious about Confucianism. In his chapter “Traditional East Asian Deep Ecology,” he paints Confucianism as a tradition primarily concerned with social interaction. It may have some value for environmental ethics inasmuch as it may be possible to transpose social values from the “human to the biotic community” (84). But fundamentally, Callicott is suspicious of Confucianism because it places too much emphasis on humans and social systems in ways that make it difficult to mesh into a deeper ecological worldview.

Qi and Social Relationships in Confucianism

Qi is a fundamentally important idea in Confucianism. It is usually taken to refer to the underlying foundations of the universe, or “material force”. Unlike the Cartesian dualism of spirit and matter, *qi* is the interconnection of both matter and spirit. A number of scholars suggest that a right understanding of *qi* is important in thinking about the contributions Confucianism could make to developing an ecological worldview, especially because it provides a “nondualistic cosmology for going beyond the conventional Western separations of matter and spirit, mind and body” (Tucker 1998: 188).

Mary Evelyn Tucker, for instance, understands *qi* as meaning “material force”. From this basis, Tucker describes the Confucian worldview as one that embraces a continual connection and closeness to nature. In this context, the spirit/matter or human/nature split often found in Western thinking is avoided in favor of a worldview which “reflects a synthesis of earlier religious worldviews of indigenous traditions in their closeness to nature” (Tucker 1998: 189). Toshio Kuwako’s “The Philosophy of Environmental Correlation in Chu Hsi” (1998) similarly looks to the philosophy of *qi*, as presented in the work of Neo-Confucian writer Chu Hsi, in order to further demonstrate a deep correlation and connection between humans and the cosmos as a whole (1998: 166).

The Neo-Confucian tradition has, more generally, been important in discussions of Confucianism and the environment. Neo-Confucianism refers to a second wave, or revival, of Confucianism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Zhu X that pays special attention to questions concerning government, education, agriculture, land, and social values. The concept of *qi* remains prevalent and important in the Neo-Confucian tradition, especially as Neo-Confucianism strives to bring the self into harmony with the rest of society and the larger cosmos.

John Berthrong's essay "Motifs for a New Confucian Ecological Vision" (1998) in particular argues in favor of paying attention to the Neo-Confucian notion of "concerned consciousness," which states that "the root of all being—or even the not yet come to be—is a concern for values as expressions of thought, action, and passion" (1998: 243). Concerned consciousness might represent an ecological position, because it operates as a mode of viewing one's self as a larger part of the cosmos. This, again, looks rather like the deep ecological idea of the extended self. To see the self as fully embedded in a larger sphere of material and spiritual existence should, Berthrong and others insist, create mechanisms for expanded care beyond the self to all aspects of the biosphere.

Concluding Thoughts on Confucianism

In "Extending the Neo-Confucian Tradition: Questions and Reconceptualizations for the Twenty-First Century" (1998) Michael Kalton agrees that some of the previously-mentioned concepts central to the Confucian tradition might be useful in reconceiving both social and environmental ethics. However, he warns that these concepts are useless unless they engage with contemporary issues, conversations, and terms. In order to become a useful tool in fostering environmental ethics, for example, Kalton maintains that "Neo-Confucian thinking must come into realistic contact with contemporary understanding and adjust itself so that serious dialogue can take place" (1998: 79).

Taking a slightly stronger stance, Rodney Taylor, in "Companionship with the World: Roots and Branches of a Confucian Ecology" (1998), warns against pinpointing single aspects of the Confucian tradition as sources of ecological guidance. "When dealing with the Confucian tradition," Taylor writes, "one can point to a potential the Confucian

tradition possesses for being a resource for environmental thinking but not to clear statements or a clear position articulating environmental awareness as we might define it" (1998: 46). Taylor, like Kalton, wants to bring Confucian thinking into the modern context, arguing that continually turning back to texts and instances runs the risk of narrow literalism.

Finally, in order to understand the possible relationship of Confucianism to the formation of an environmental ethic, Robert Weller and Peter Bol explore Confucian impacts upon Chinese environmental policy implementation, and draw two conclusions. First, "In each of the dominant worldviews discussed here [Confucianism] . . . the fate of political authority and the well being of human society are integrally linked to the larger environment." Secondly, they maintain that despite the prevalence of resources within Confucianism for ecological thinking, the Chinese saw no need for the "establishment of ecologically sound environmental attitudes, policies, or practices" (Weller and Bol 1998: 336). This point recalls Yi-Fu Tuan's cautionary note that "on-the-ground" practices of the Chinese have hardly lived up to the ideal expressed in their traditions. Finally, as did Kalton and Berthrong, Weller and Bol contend that the Confucian tradition itself must continue to evolve with its political, social, and cultural surroundings, so as to articulate effective and accessible ecological thinking.

Daoism

As has already been observed, Daoism has been the more favored of the Chinese religious traditions in recent attempts to think about environmental ethics in a Chinese context. It was Daoism to which Huston Smith pointed 30 years ago in "Tao Now: an Ecological Testament" (1972) and today it remains a primary focus of contemporary discussions ranging from ecofeminism to deep ecology. (The difference in size between the volumes of *Daoism and Ecology* versus the *Confucianism and Ecology* in the Harvard series illustrates this matter quite clearly!) But within the literature on Daoism there is a significant difference of views. What James Miller in the introduction to the *Daoism and Ecology* volume calls the "Dao Wars" symbolizes the divide between, on the one hand, scholars and practitioners of Chinese origin, and on the other, Western practitioners of Daoism

such as Alan Watts. Here, “the popularizers ignore the scholars and the scholars mock the popularizers” (2001a: liii). In the context of this paper, while giving a nod to the fruitful work done by “popularizers” in America and in China, especially with regard to environmental activism, I will primarily focus on the work of the scholars.

The work of James Miller provides a solid basis from which to begin an interrogation of the field. In his essay “Daoism” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005) Miller crucially reminds the scholar that there is no one Daoism. Rather Daoism is a variety of beliefs that have at their heart the *Dao* as “the wellspring of life, and the human condition as inextricably folded into a matrix of cosmic creativity. The staggering diversity and often conflicting values of these movements preclude any attempt at defining a unitary Daoist view of nature” (2005: 8). Despite this diversity of views, Roger Ames in “The Local and the Focal in Realizing a Daoist World” (2001), though echoing Miller, insists that Daoism(s) contain many possibilities for ecological living. According to Ames, the Daoist worldview contains a recurrent set of themes, vocabulary, and tools for generating meaning in ways that define the self always in reference to the world in which the self is embedded. Although, then, there is a variety of Daoisms, Ames argues that these themes are common. Because of the prevalent emphasis on what he calls a “relational worldview” in Daoism, Ames argues, Daoists’ worldviews reflect possibilities for “ecological commitment” (2001: 280). Both Miller and Ames rely on the work of Sarah Allen (1997) to understand nature symbolism and the role of this symbolism in the Daoist understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. For all three, the Daoist worldview is shaped by a vocabulary which derives from and reflects relationships to the natural world.

As a means to demonstrate the prevalence of nature-referencing language in Daoism, D.C. Lau and Roger Ames in *Yuan Dao: Tracing Dao to its Source* (1998), present an important translation of the *Huainanzi* followed by interpretive essays drawing together many central Daoist themes concerning order, cosmos, situation, agency, nature, and unity, all of which are necessary for thinking about a Daoist eco-philosophy. The *Huainanzi*, considered one of the preeminent texts of Daoism, concerns itself most with the relation of the Chinese subject to the state and society of China. However, Miller (2005) shows how the *Huainanzi* is a cosmological text in which the seasons, phases, direc-

tions, and days of heaven are correlated with limbs, organs, orifices, and joints of the human body.

A similarly crucial essay is Russell Kirkland's "Self Fulfillment through Selflessness: The Moral Teachings of the *Daodejing*" (2002), exploring the moral teachings found in the *Daode Jing*. The *Daode Jing*, written around the fourth century B.C.E., contains the most famous lines often argued to illustrate the nature of Daoism: "Dao is no more—and no less—than the flourishing of nature itself." From this text and tradition, the "Dao" is considered to be the "way". The text itself, more philosophical than the *Huanianzi*, seeks to instruct the practitioner on how to obtain an optimal state of harmonic or balanced integration with both material and spiritual realms of existence. According to Kirkland, the *Daode Jing* contains lessons, derived from nature, for human moral reasoning and action. The text teaches, Kirkland explains, that one should "judge human activity by how well it correlates to activity seen in 'nature'" (2002: 27).

In addition to these primers on Daoism and Daoist texts, the work of N.J. Girardot, specifically "Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism" (1996) is particularly important. These texts then, rather than exploring the connections of Daoism to nature, instead offer useful primers on key texts of the Daoist worldview and tradition central to the dialogue of Daoism and Ecology.

Nature, Wu-wei, and Ziran

Despite the continued insistence on the eco-friendly nature of Daoism by many scholars, there is sustained debate over the "nature of nature" in Daoist literature and philosophy. In his essay "Ecologism versus Moralism: Conceptions of Nature in Some Literary texts of Ming-Qing Times" (2001), literary scholar Paolo Santangelo argues that the Chinese notion of nature acts both as a metaphor for emotion, and as an "opportunity for aesthetic and/or religious contemplation" and that "both perspectives are unified by a deep religious moral-sense that is based on the concept of unity of the whole universe and on the search for personal perfection" (2001: 617). Further, he notes the difficulty of comparing Western concepts of nature to those of the Chinese. For example, the Chinese concept of nature is not necessarily the same as the Western understanding of nature, or wilderness. Nature for the Chinese, in other words, often refers

to that which is beyond the material, whereas in the Western context nature is often taken to mean some material spaces of the world as found, for example, in wilderness.

Peter Marshall's argument in "Taoism: The Way of Nature" (1992) contrasts greatly with that of Santangelo. While he recognizes the emotional and spiritual aspects to nature, Marshall insists that nature represents the complete world out of which both the cosmos and society spring. Nature, he notes, is the all encompassing embrace of the cosmos, and therefore "the philosophy of nature and society of Taoism offers the first and most impressive expression" of ecological thinking and living (1992: 100), a point echoed in the many works of James Miller (1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2005).

Thomas Hahn, in "An Introductory Study on Daoist Notions of Wilderness" (2001) building on both these works, argues that in fact wilderness and nature are more alike in Daoist thought than Santangelo would grant (2001: 211). Hahn maintains that throughout Daoist literature, nature can be read equally as ephemeral and abstract and as a physical and objective reality. Further, he explains that physical nature often takes on the same descriptions as those used to connote wilderness in the West. Nature often occupies the spaces that are without humans, or even indifferent to humans, a perspective that, he argues, has paved the way for the human domination of nature.

Perpetually intertwined with this debate over Daoist interpretations of nature is a running dialogue over the meaning of *wu-wei*. The quantity of literature on this subject demonstrates that much of the debate over the tools that Daoism might have to offer ecological thought revolve around understanding the notion of *wu-wei*. But even those who agree on the possibility that Daoism may contribute to a new environmental ethic do not necessarily agree on the meaning of this term.

One of the more erudite interrogations of *wu-wei* is in Roger Ames's "Taoism and the Nature of Nature" (1986) where *wu-wei*, often portrayed as non-action in terms of passivity, is presented as a model for creative participation in the cosmos in a manner that coheres with one's surroundings rather than resists them. In a similar fashion, Liu Xianogan writes, "*Wu-wei* does not actually mean purely passive or negative attitudes, but a high standard or criterion, which means the most appropriate behavior" (Liu 2001, 329). For Ames, *wu-wei* represents a mode of action, but one that does not go

against the grain of nature, so to speak. It is the kind of action or engagement with the world which does not “make something false to itself” (Ames 1986: 343). Correspondingly, Liu Xianogan maintains that *wu-wei* is action that leads one into natural harmony, with its opposite being reckless, aggressive, and harmful actions toward self, society, and natural order (2001: 328). For both, then, *wu-wei* refers to naturally restrained action.

According to Ip PoKeung in “Taoism and the Foundation of Environmental Ethics” (1986), the problem with much of the scholarship surrounding Daoism and ecology is its rootedness in the Western dichotomous split of human and nature. Debating over the nature of “nature” or one’s actions within nature only serves to support this dichotomy. Moving beyond this metaphysical barrier would allow scholars to recognize the interrelations of humans, nature, and the power of *wu-wei* and provide the basis from which an environmental ethic might follow.

Just as Marshall and Santangelo debate the connections of Daoist understandings of nature to Western understandings of nature, Michael LaFargue in “Nature as a Part of Human Culture in Daoism” (2001), criticizes these readings of *wu-wei* as nothing more than a “grab bag approach to Daoism” which leads to scholars making dangerous assumptions and connections that do not reside within the tradition. Rather than attempt to extract Daoist resources, LaFargue argues that one should turn to other traditions so as to locate new positions and views that “modern environmentalists might learn from” (2001: 46). In this regard, he depicts nature in the Daoist worldview as being an equally culturally-constructed idea as it is in the West. Therefore, one must not look so much at the terms and their meanings as resources, but rather understand the ways in which the cultures have constructed and related to those terms.

Rising out of this ferment over the essence and meaning of *wu wei*, is the problem of action and/or responsibility versus “non-action” in Daoist thought and practice. For Chi-Tim Lai, in “The Daoist Concept of Central Harmony: Human Responsibility for the Maladies of Nature” (2001) the question is not one of action versus non-action, but of action versus responsible action. According to Chi-Tim Lai, the notion of “Central Harmony”, which encompasses the relationship of Heaven, Earth, and human, demands responsible action in order to foster and maintain harmonious relationships between humans and the world. The principal concern of *wu-wei*, he argues, is “how

to live in conscious connection with Heaven and Earth by complying with the laws of nature" (Lai 2001: 96-100).

In several of his works Russell Kirkland (2001, 2002), drawing on the texts of *Zhuangzi* and *Daode jing*, argues for a concept of "responsible non-action" resembling responsible action in the sense that Chi-Tim Lai sees it. The *Zhuangzi* is a text associated with a Chinese philosopher of the same name who is thought to have lived around the fourth century B.C.E. It is argued that, reacting to the Confucian insistence on social ordering, the *Zhuangzi* advocates a relativity of understanding and behavior that shows concern for the dynamic interactions of all forms of life. Because of these emphases, scholars have searched the text for possible ecological insights. In both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daode jing*, scholars examine the meaning of what Kirkland calls "responsible non-action", as opposed to non-action or passivity. Responsible non-action, he articulates, functions as a mode of selfless action where "one achieves self-fulfillment as one is selflessly benefiting the lives of others" (2002: 33). This is quite reminiscent of Karyn Lai's point that Daoism provides support for an ethical holism that perceives the whole in the context of the well being of others (Lai, K.: 2003). The goal of ecological sustainability, Kirkland and Lai argue, is obtainable by way of this altruistic action in favor of the cosmos rather than the self. Keep in mind, however, that this is one particular reading. Others have criticized this reading by arguing that such action is really only confined to humans, and therefore appears more anthropocentric than those seeking environmental inspiration would like to admit.

Lisa Raphals follows up Kirkland's work on "responsible non-action" in her essay "Metic Intelligence or Responsible Non-Action" (2001). She argues for "modes of action that are indirect, work at distance, and do not involve heroic, deliberative, or even necessarily deliberate intervention" (2001: 305). Self cultivation, she argues, contains the possibility to effect change in the world by living and teaching through example. Despite noting the values and potentialities of Daoist philosophies of self-cultivation, Raphals is conscious of the difficulties of reading back into ancient texts ideas from our modern perspective.

While Raphals and Kirkland, to name but a few, praise possibilities for *wu-wei* and the concept of non-action, the most recently published article included in this survey of literature argues that in fact neither *wu-wei* nor the text of *Zhuangzi* offer tools for environmen-

talism. In “Why Daoism is Not Environmentalism” (2005)¹ Paul R. Goldin discusses several passages that might instruct the Daoist not to interfere with nature, even if the Daoist perceives the natural environment to be in a state of anthropogenic degradation. Some aspects of Daoism, Goldin argues, offer perspectives for viewing the world as changing and in flux; therefore the human drive to achieve balance through environmental sustainability works contrary to the Daoist insistence on dynamic change.

Just as *wu-wei* and non-action in the world are highly debated issues in the canon of literature surrounding Daoism and ecological thought, another equally contested term, also intimately tied to *wu-wei* and questions of nature, is that of *ziran* (also transliterated as *tzu-jan*). David Hall (2001) argues that *ziran* is the natural order of things. It is the spontaneous expression of the individual parts comprising the totality of the cosmos. According to Chung Ying Cheng, in “On the Environmental Ethics of The Tao and Chi” (1986), *ziran*, identified as the movement of the Dao itself, is the underlying unity of all things, and source of all life. It is impossible, Cheng argues, to separate out *ziran* from discussions concerning *wu-wei*, definitions of nature, and environmental action (Cheng 1986, 356). According to Liu Xiaogan, *ziran* represents naturalness, upon which *wu-wei* strives to model itself. *Ziran*, he continues, “indicates the principle and state of natural harmony of human societies and the whole universe” (2001: 327). This point stands in interesting contrast to the recent comments of Goldin, who rejects the emphasis on harmony and wholeness in favor of change, flux, and dynamism.

Control and Social Order in Daoism

Debates about cosmic and societal order have been particularly prominent in discussions of Chinese religious traditions. Most frequently, as we have seen, it is argued that Confucian worldviews are strongly oriented towards cosmic and societal order, while Daoist worldviews attempt to break the constraints of socio-cosmic order. Daoism is thus often understood to be a religion of nature versus the social

¹ This essay is part of a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, March 2005 addressing Chinese thought and the environmental crisis. I will not deal with the entire issue as all the papers do not all necessarily apply to this project. However, I will discuss those that do apply and will note all of them in the bibliography.

religion of Confucianism (Kinsley, 1995; Marshall, 1992; VanHoutan, 1988). However, not all scholars agree. Kristofer Shipper in "Daoist Ecology: The Inner Transformation" (2001) emphasizes the importance of order to Daoism. He focuses on the *One Hundred and Eighty Precepts*, which he calls "one of the most important documents concerning Daoist ecology" (2001: 80). The *One Hundred and Eighty Precepts* is a short text, which, drawing on Confucianism, lays out rules and guidelines for the ordering of society. Twenty of these rules, or precepts, concern the natural environment. Shipper argues that this text allows for an understanding of Daoism where cultivating the self and society in line with specific rules and institutions is required for harmony with the cosmos as a whole. Similarly, Terry F. Kleeman, in "Daoism and the Quest for Order" (2001), maintains that "Daoism, far from the individualist freedom often pronounced in Western popularizations of 'Taoism', is order, the programmed, controlled order of a well-managed and closely regulated world" (2001: 61; see also Anderson, 2001). For some this might sound close to fascist, but for Kleeman and Anderson, the strict social ordering tendencies of Daoism provide a framework for enforcing behavior in line with an environmental ethic.

Where some treat the ordering tendencies of Daoism as positive, others such as R.P. Peerenboom fear that they turn Daoism into "metaphysical absolutism" and thus risk the success of an environmental ethic. In "Beyond Naturalism: A Reconstruction of Daoist Environmental Ethics" (1991) he questions the view of Daoism as a mode of "living and acting naturally" or living in accordance with nature. This position, he argues, is more dangerous to ecological goals than it is helpful. For Peerenboom, the notion that one can obey the laws of nature, as some understandings of *wu wei* suggest, seems to create a situation where humans are separate from nature. In stating this, he also ruminates on the problems of defining "nature". "Which nature are humans supposed to follow?" he wonders. Working from a postmodern perspective, Peerenboom cautions against believing that a one, true "nature" exists. Nature is not a singular static thing, but rather a conglomeration of concepts that humans have applied to the world around them. Because of this, it is impossible to "follow nature" as some suggest. Therefore, he suggests understanding "nature" and human choices to be varied and contextual, in what he calls a "postmodern pragmatism". Through this post-

modern pragmatism, he suggests the “weighing of available options in light of our best confirmed theories about nature, one hopes to balance the often conflicting values, interests, and goals to achieve consensual equilibrium” (1991: 19). In the end, he praises the attempt to strive for universal harmony, but argues that one must allow the universal to be organic. In a sense he reverts to Daoist imagery despite criticizing it throughout his essay.

J.J. Clarke (2000) explains, in support of Peerenboom, that neither *dao* nor *wu-wei* refer to predetermined order, but rather to spontaneous and emergent order and action. Contrary to those who insist that *dao* refers to a predetermined, “natural” order toward which we must strive, Clarke and Peerenboom insist that *dao* is “a heuristic imagery of harmony to which we and the rest of nature must aspire”, rather than fixed patterns or absolutes (2000: 86). In addition, both agree that this view aids in the avoidance of Western misinterpretations that conceive of Daoism as a monolithic tradition and a panacea for environmental ills. Rather, their views, they suggest, encourage situationally sensitive approaches to contextual problems (Clarke 2000: 87, Peerenboom 1991: 22).

Eco-feminism, Deep Ecology, and Daoism

Ecofeminism—like deep ecology—is an umbrella term for a variety of different philosophical and ethical commitments. Most ecofeminists, though, accept that there is some kind of connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and maintain that both need to be overcome. Many ecofeminists also argue that in making ethical decisions, context and situated knowledge (as opposed to the application of abstract principles) is particularly important. The emphasis in Daoism on situated knowledge, as noted by Clarke and Peerenboom above, some scholars argue, make ecofeminism and Daoism natural allies.

Sharon Rowe and James Sellman, in “An Uncommon Alliance: Ecofeminism and Classical Daoist Philosophy” (2003), see Daoism as a near perfect version of eco-feminism, being both a pragmatic and a process-oriented philosophy. Echoing Peerenboom they write that both Daoism and ecofeminism strive toward a rejection of universalistic and ideological constructions that define humans over others, or men over and against women. Because both emphasize “situated

knowledge” through context-based situations, Rowe and Sellman maintain that the Daoist worldview is one of relations, and therefore one which makes for a good bedfellow with ecofeminism (2003: 147).

Likewise, Huey-li Li in “A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism” (1993) states that practices attempting to follow universalistic ideals run the risk of moving toward ideology. Such universalisms therefore run the risk of oppressing others in ways no different than fascism. Universalism, she maintains, is nothing more than the thought process responsible for the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (1993: 421). However, in the end, she does maintain that aspects of Daoism do provide avenues for participating in the world along the lines of organic holism while emphasizing pragmatic integration with the world. On this point, she echoes Peerenboom’s “postmodern pragmatism”.

As noted in the section on Confucianism, a central aspect of many forms of deep ecology is the idea that the self is organically connected and interrelated to the cosmos. Baird Callicott, in *Earth’s Insights* (1994), compares Daoism to deep ecology on the grounds that both understand the self as subsumed within the larger Self of nature. He maintains that Daoism is integral to deep ecology because there “is harmony in the whole . . . Such is the Tao!” (1994: 70). Richard Bennett and David Sylvan maintain in “Taoism and Deep Ecology” (1988) that Daoism is “thoroughly ecologically oriented; a high level of ecological consciousness is built into it, and it provides the practical basis for a way of life whose main tenet is ‘Follow Nature’” (1988: 152). However, despite such an embrace of Daoism in an ecological cause, these arguments have not gone unchallenged by scholars of Daoism and Chinese culture.

Jordan Paper, in his essay “‘Daoism’ and ‘Deep Ecology’: Fantasy and Potentiality” (2001), attacks both deep ecologists, and Callicott, for their treatment of Daoism. “While most sympathetic with many of the views expressed by the writings of deep ecology,” Paper writes, “I find the Daoism expressed simplistic to the point of absurdity: it is ahistorical, the authors have no understanding that the interpretation of texts continually changes over time . . . In sum, the Daoism of the deep ecologists is utterly a modern Western one” (2001: 11-12). Furthermore, Paper argues, the environmental crisis does not mean that the time has come for the “donning of rose-colored glasses of romantic interpretations” of other cultures in the quest to save the world (2001: 4).

In “Salvation in the Garden” (2001), Jeffrey Meyer likewise doubts the existence of anything resembling the deep ecological ethic in Daoism. First, he notes that the problems of today were not problems faced by early Daoists. Further, he argues—and unlike deep ecology—Daoism contains elements of human control and domination over nature as exemplified in its extensive garden tradition. However, despite rejecting the connection between Daoism and deep ecology, Meyer maintains that the Chinese garden tradition can in fact provide modes and models for environmental respect in which humans are participating partners in a cooperative relationship with the natural world (2001: 227-228).

Other scholars take more of a “middle way” between the critics of an environmentalist reading of Daoism and its supporters. David Cooper for instance, in his essay “Is Daoism Green?” (1996) acknowledges the nature symbolism in Daoism, but criticizes scholars for the assumption that symbolism necessarily leads to, or necessitates, action to protect nature. “Given the readiness with which some environmentalists invoke Daoist authority,” he writes, “it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that the contribution of the classical masters to the ‘green issues’ will be *at best indirect*” (1996: 85, *italics mine*). As noted earlier, Cooper reminds readers of Yi-Fu Tuan’s point that just because environmental ideals might exist in theory, text, or teachings, this does not mean they always translate to on-the-ground practice and behavior. In a similar vein, Robert Ford Campany (2001) and Joanne D. Birdwhistell (2001), while embracing ecological concerns, argue that projects investigating Chinese religions and environmental thought/ethics would do better to recognize that early Daoist practitioners were not concerned with ecological practice. This is, after all, a modern problem, a modern concept, and therefore a modern project of awareness and action.

Because of this interest in environmental practice, some scholars have turned away from looking at textual traditions and are investigating instead the popular practices of ordinary citizens in China: those found in *Feng-shui*, as well as syncretic folk practices. The following section offers a survey of some of the literature that has investigated the ways in which Chinese folk traditions might cast an interesting light on human relationships to nature.

*Popular Belief, Folk Practice, and Modes of Resistance**Gardening, Feng-Shui, and Working with the Land*

Jeffrey Meyer (2001), as we have seen, is critical of deep ecological readings of Daoism and of ideas that Daoism can be seen as a “salvation religion” in an ecological context. Daoism, he argues, is largely elitist; the experience of oneness with nature is generally obtained through mystical practice “and therefore cannot be used as an ethic applicable to everyone” (2001: 228). Instead, Meyer argues that Chinese gardening practices should be taken more seriously. He praises gardening because of its “common” nature throughout Chinese culture. Although gardening was practiced by the elite, it opened up spaces for all classes to enjoy. Further, he maintains that Chinese gardening is evidence, not of control over nature, but of a dialectical relationship where nature is an active partner. This is important for Meyer. Chinese folk gardening—common in Chinese culture—opens doors for responsible human participation in the natural world. In other words, gardening can work with nature, rather than against it, on Meyer’s reading.

This idea of working with nature is central to the positions advocating the significance of folk practices of Chinese gardening, as well as the larger architectural and ecological practices of *feng-shui*. Stephen Field provides a solid introduction in “Feng-Shui” (2005), depicting it as “the common name for various techniques originating in China that bring good fortune to people when the environments in which they reside are properly oriented” (2005: 27). He compares *feng-shui* to the divinatory arts, where practitioners seek the alignment of physical bodies (both human and constructed), and architectural structures, with the unseen life forces of nature called *qi*. In his essay “In search of Dragons: The Folk Ecology of Feng-shui” (2001), Field continues his discussion of *feng-shui* beyond the realm of description, bringing it into conversation with ideas relevant to environmental ethics. Based on *qi* (*ch’i*), the energy of the cosmos, Field maintains that *feng-shui* offers the best possibility for the derivation of an ecological ethic. Rather than science, he argues that religion “is a much more powerful motivator . . . when it comes to the preservation of the environment”. Further, because *feng-shui* is the most commonly adopted and practiced Chinese tradition, Field maintains, *feng-shui* offers more practical solutions for healing the human-to-nature divide

than do other traditions of China (2001: 187). Again, while the emphasis on common or widespread practice is central to Field's argument, he also praises *feng-shui*, as does Meyer, because he feels that it offers methods for reciprocally participating with nature in ways respectful and ethical.

Ole Bruun in "Fengshui and the Chinese Perception of Nature" (1995) follows this line of thought, maintaining that *feng-shui* is a good source of ethical ecological living on the basis that it is embraced most widely by the "common people in China" (1995: 173). In addition, because *feng-shui* operates as a tool through which individuals and community seek to understand their place in the cosmos and social world, Bruun explains that *feng-shui* offers tools for subtle protest and political statements. He explains that the practices of *feng-shui* rose to prominence in rebellion against communist suppression of religion in China; it therefore may offer tools not just for connection to nature, but also for political protest, a point that will be revisited shortly.

In "Flowering Apricot: Environmental Practice, Folk Religion, and Daoism" (2001), E.N. Anderson presents Daoism as a religion closer to *feng-shui* and to general folk tradition than commonly suspected; which, in turn, suggests that they should be considered in relation to one another. For this reason, I am discussing this essay in this section rather than the one devoted to Daoism. "Daoism", he writes, "is closely related to the wider complex of belief that makes up Chinese traditional religion. Pragmatic management of land, water, plant, and animal resources were typically represented in spiritual or broadly religious terms" (2001: 157). However, Anderson quickly points out that this nature practice, management, and symbolism does not necessarily equate to an environmental ethic in the American sense. And this brings us back again to Yi-Fu Tuan's point: neither does its widespread practice in China equate to environmentally sound ways of living there either. If *feng-shui* is so environmentally friendly and sustainable, in addition to being widely practiced, then why such a history of environmental destruction in China?

T.N. Jenkins (2002) responds to Anderson by arguing that *feng-shui* is no less an elitist tradition than Confucianism and Daoism. Therefore scholars, he writes, need to focus more on folk and/or popular practices "on the ground" which he labels a "vital syncretism" more suited for ecological ethics than the high traditions. However, presumably there's no reason why either folk or elite

traditions should in principle be more suited to the development of environmental ethics. But for Jenkins, popular religion offers tools for environmental change due to its power to “catalyze appropriate social change”:

In many ways, it appears futile to engage in Chinese popular practice in the creation of an environmental ethic. Recourse to traditions does not, of itself, prevent ecological degradation where motives are purely practical . . . Yet, popular religion embodies values of collective self interest which may offer a survival advantage over short-term and ultimately destructive individualism and, from an environmental policy perspective, buoyant popular religious values can catalyze appropriate social change (Jenkins 2002: 47).

It is this final note on the embrace of the “collective self”, or the interests of society over the individual, Jenkins argues, that one might find exemplified in everyday practice and environmental protest emerging in China recently. How true this statement is, is a question that needs to be addressed, although it does not fall into the scope of this paper.

Resistance and Protest

In his essay “Religion as Resistance” in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance* (2001), Stephan Feuchtwang argues that popular religion has provided some of the “most provocative elements in mass campaigns” (2001: 161). While he does not deal specifically with environmental resistance, the essay is valuable for understanding the nature of resistance movements in China. In the same volume Jun Jing in “Environmental Protests in Rural China” explores the role of folk fertility and kinship goddesses in protest movements in China as exemplified in petitions for cleaner water, land reclamation, pollution of the Yellow River, and the Three Rivers Dam project on the Yhangzi. Martin Palmer, in “Saving China’s Holy Mountains” (1996), while describing the historically sacred nature of mountainous sites to Chinese culture and religion, discusses the role of a syncretism of Taoism, Buddhism, and *Feng-Shui* in the current movements to protect these holy hilltops from the rapidly sweeping trends of development and tourism.

Despite these examples of Chinese religion resisting change or at least providing motivation towards resistance, Sarah Martens (2005)

argues that research into environmental groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) demonstrates that they espouse moral values *not* derived from traditional religious or folk practice. "It seems safe to conclude", she states, "that China's better-known environmental groups are not driven or inspired by typically Chinese or religiously inspired nature-perceptions", but rather demonstrate clear evidence of Western influence (2005: 71). However, if she is willing to offer anything up in favor of Chinese religion it is to the activities of popular folk practice. While the formalized organizations and NGOs show little influence of folk practice, the less formalized resistance movements often encompass more explicit combinations of Chinese religion. Beyond China, I should note, Chinese religions have been especially important in forming values and tools for activism in the West. The North American radical environmental movement, for example, contains many elements of Chinese traditions. Scholar of religion and specialist on radical environmental movements Bron Taylor maintains that Western environmental activists "engage in processes and practices inspired by and borrowed from Native American traditions . . . combining them freely with practices from traditional religions (especially Buddhism, Daoism, and Hinduism) . . ." (Taylor 2002: 44). As noted earlier, Western environmental philosophy and spiritually-inspired activism has drawn heavily on a range of Chinese tropes whether these are Daoist, Confucian, or folk traditions.

Beliefs and Practices: Ecological Damage in China

China's large population and grand economic ambitions make it the single most important environmental actor on the global stage . . . What happens in China, like what happens in the United States, is therefore central to one of the great questions of our time: Will the human species survive the many environmental pressures crowding in on it at the end of the twentieth (and into the twenty-first) century? (Hertsgaard 1998: 6)

The state of China is "genuinely disquieting!" (Smil 1993: 8)

The last passage above is from Mark Hertsgaard's *Earth Odyssey* (1998) in which he travels the globe on a depressing mission to see the world's ecological pains with his own eyes. In China he sees mostly nothing but spewing chemicals into rivers and neighborhoods, smog

and smoke so thick a face mask might not help, and simply, people everywhere. In light of such texts demonstrating China's skill at ecological destruction one cannot help but re-think the possibilities claimed to reside in Chinese religious traditions.

As it has been impossible not to note already, one of the earliest voices of skepticism about the role of Chinese religions in environmental protection was Yi-Fu Tuan's in 1967. He questions the assumption that Confucians, Daoists, or practitioners of *feng-shui* are less guilty of environmental degradation than those of any other tradition or none. "If animistic belief and Taoist nature philosophy lie at the back of an adaptive attitude toward nature", he wonders, "what conceptions and ideals have encouraged the Chinese through their long history, to engage in works of construction or negatively in deforested mountains?" (1967: 184). Similarly, Jenkins (2002) demands scholars take into account "why Chinese traditions have singularly failed to halt environmental degradation where they have flourished" (2002: 185).

In his essay "Tao How?" (1993) Phillip Novak, mimicking the title of Huston Smith's early essay "Tao Now: An Ecological Testament", reflects upon the myriad Daoist failures to curb environmental destruction. Referring to Smith's article, Novak writes, "If my interrogative betrays a greater diffidence than his imperative, it is only because China, the land of the Tao, lacks an enviable environmental record. Sadly, it seems that the existence of noble cultural ideals regarding the environment have not been a sufficient guarantee of good stewardship" (1993: 77). Interestingly, Novak's solution resides in the turn to the movements of Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and others to retell the evolutionary story as a sacred story inducing at the very least an ethic of kinship. (One is left wondering, however, if the Daoist notions of interrelatedness, i.e. kinship, don't work, what makes Novak suspect that "The Great Story" will?)

In exploring the relationship of religion to the state of China's environmental degradation no essay should go without mentioning the pivotal work of Vaclav Smil. China's record, he writes, "is a mixture of some excellent intentions and notable achievements with as much casual neglect, astonishing irresponsibility and outright destruction! The state of China is 'genuinely disquieting!'" (Smil 1993: 8). Indeed, ironically a recent article in the journal *Science and the Total Environment* describes the ways in which nature-oriented rituals involving mass incense burnings actually contribute to poor air

quality on certain occasions, causing lung illnesses and weakened immune systems (Fang 2002).

According to Smil, the religious ideals hailed by scholars of Chinese religions and ecology have failed to have any real impact on the ecological state of China, or the rest of the world. Therefore, he insists on the “need for such human, realistic, but effective control strategies by marshalling in the facts about the precarious state of China’s environment, and by showing the burdens imposed by the combination of a huge and growing population, ambitious economic modernization plans, and expectations of better living” (Smil 1993: 35). Without explicitly stating so, Smil seems to be calling for a rejuvenation of China’s one-child policy, this time with greater education and information rather than laws and dogmatic demands.

Yi-Fu Tuan’s essay, however, also points out the complicated nature of relations between beliefs and practices in complex societies: “besides the more glaring contradictions of professed ideal and actual practice, there exist also the unsuspected ironies: these derive from the fact that the institutions of a complex society are not always able to foresee all the consequences of their behavior” (Tuan 1967: 188). Tuan reminds the reader that other elements outside of religion, such as politics, economics, technological development, drive nations to commit acts of degradation. The weight is not solely on the shoulders of religious traditions. For example, many scholars maintain that the practices of Maoism and the industrial drive of China to catch up with the rest of the modern Western world are simply too powerful for religion to resist, especially considering the Maoist opposition to religious practice in China. Judith Shapiro’s *Mao’s War Against Nature* (2001) is an excellent text for understanding the role of Maoist politics in the rise of China and the destruction of its ecosystems.

Setting his disgust aside, Smil provides a useful investigation into the environmental history of China over the course of the past fifty years, demonstrating the powerful and insurmountable monster of industrialization and economics. The September 1999 edition of *China Quarterly* consisted of articles solely dealing with the issues surrounding environmental pollution and policy implementation in China over the same fifty years. Richard Louis Edmond’s essay “The Environment in the People’s Republic of China 50 Years On” is the most accessible to the interested reader, while the others offer some interesting presentations of data. Edmonds maintains that despite questions

of resource depletion in the coming years, the real concerns lie in and around questions of air pollution in urban and/or densely populated areas.

Despite this focus on the Mao years and later, some scholars also point out that this crisis is nothing new, and that environmental degradation is not solely attributable to the industrial revolution of China alone. Religions themselves have played an equal part in the destruction of the natural world throughout the history of China, dating back to before the Common Era. Sing Chew's *World Ecological Degradation* (2001), devotes attention to China's sketchy environmental record dating back to 500 B.C.E. The population, he argues, made a jump from 50 million before the first millennium B.C.E. to more than 100 million by 1000 C.E. Such a leap in population leaves few options, according to Chew, other than rapid depletion of resources and denuding of forests.

Mark Elvin's work in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (1973) charts the political, social, and economic changes in the Chinese empire, often paying attention to the place of nature. In a later paper, Elvin maintains that "China has pursued ecologically unsustainable patterns for three thousand years, avoiding total breakdown by periodically adapting to crisis with new technologies or new spatial expansions." (Elvin 1998: 41) It is this history of environmental abuse that many scholars argue gave rise to Mencius's well known and moving reflection on the state of Ox Mountain, in which he argued for the need for environmental thought and action (Berthrong 2001; Ivanhoe 2001; Jenkins 2001). More recently, Mark Elvin published *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (2004), which along with the Harvard Series on Religion and Ecology, must be noted for its breadth of material and extensive bibliography. In this text, Elvin traces a variety of aspects of Chinese environmental history: from the spread of the Chinese style of farming that eliminated the habitat of the Chinese elephant population to the destruction of most of the forests; the transformative impact of war on the landscape; the re-engineering of the countryside through water-control systems, such as the controversial Three Rivers Dam project on the Yhangzi; and finally the contemporary push toward technological advancement and modernization.

Conclusion: Change on All Fronts

Jordan and Li Chaung Paper (1995), recognizing that no religious tradition or culture develops in a vacuum, note the importance of paying attention to ways in which religions both shape and respond to varying historical situations and context. In this field of scholarship many scholars assume that these religious texts, philosophies, and practices hold at least some possibilities for responding to, or understanding, the environmental crisis in ethics and practice. And although some discuss these traditions in static or monolithic ways, suggesting that they can be seen as stores of tools which might be used to combat today's ecological crisis, others increasingly note the importance of revisiting religious traditions on a contextual basis (Paper and Paper 1995, LaFargue 2001, Kalton 1998, Raphals 2001, Taylor 1998, etc).

It is my hope that this essay will provide not only a stepping stone for scholars developing an interest in the field, but will likewise be a motivating factor for the continuance of these conversations in the ongoing effort to understand possible interpretations of the human relationship to the entire cosmos and all its inhabitants.

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