

these questions is the sense of China as a country in the process of modernization, a country whose sense of cultural identity is caught between the weight of history and the demands of a future waiting to be realized. In a city like Hangzhou, this uncertainty and tension is etched onto the landscape, literally and figuratively, as the demands of culture, history, ecology, and economy change the face of the earth, create new forms of engagement with nature, and write themselves into the cultural imagination in new and perhaps unpredictable ways.

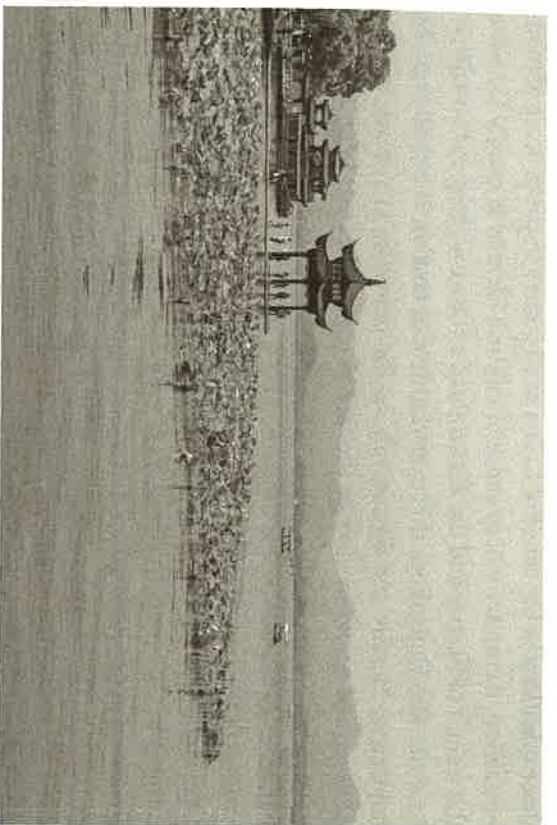
One of the lesser known tourist attractions on the north side of West Lake is the Daoist temple known as Baopu daoyuan 抱朴道院. It is a temple devoted to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), a scholar from an influential family that, over subsequent generations, had a profound impact on the history of Daoism. Ge Hong's scholarly ambition was to collect the tales and legends of immortals, men and women who had changed their bodies through an alchemical process and transcended the world. He was convinced that such stories contained more than a grain of truth, and that the riches of the natural world could be unlocked for the benefit of human beings in a way that few could imagine. Far from advocating the exploitation of nature for social and economic development, the tales that he collected held forth a vision of nature more rich and life enhancing than anything that could be obtained through a narrow rational calculus. They described the extraordinary powers of minerals, metals, flora, and fauna that could be concocted into an elixir of immortality, a prize sought by earlier emperors who had bankrupted the state in their megalomaniac desire to rule forever. For Ge Hong, however, such a quest was not driven by a desire to serve the ambitions of the powerful. His was a profoundly religious ambition bound up with the requirements of faith, devotion, and proper moral orientation.¹

Today, the temple is a complex of buildings improbably stacked together on the side of a steep mountain overlooking the lake. It contains several shrines, a tea house, and living quarters for a small community of Daoist nuns. Although impoverished by the ravages of China's century of revolutions, the temple thrives to this day and preserves the memory of Ge Hong, the Master Who Embraced Simplicity, welcoming both pilgrims and tourists who have perhaps tired of the flashy Buddhist temples and historical monuments that surround the lake below. Above a small shrine on the right side is inscribed the following couplet: "Obtain the aligned vitality of the landscape" (De shanshui zhengqi 得山水正氣), and, on the left,

2 The Subjectivity of Nature

The Vitality of the Landscape

Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province, is a dynamic modern city of some 21 million inhabitants close to China's east coast. In many ways it epitomizes the best of modern China. It has a high per capita GDP of over US\$12,000. It is home to the Alibaba Group, whose initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange raised US\$25 billion, the largest in history. It hosts a number of top universities, including Zhejiang University (a C9 University, China's equivalent to the U.S. Ivy League). It is also one of China's most famous tourist destinations, most notably due to the well-preserved West Lake tourism area, a UNESCO world heritage site. As a city prized for its natural beauty, cultural heritage, economic development, and advanced technology, it perfectly embodies the changing question of nature in the modern Chinese social imagination. Can nature be responsibly exploited as a resource for tourism development? Can the world's Internet economy be powered in an ecologically sustainable way? How is the human experience of nature's beauty inexorably entwined with China's cultural history? What is the significance of this natural beauty and cultural history for China's national ambitions? Lying behind



West Lake Pavilion and Water Lilies, Hangzhou. (Daniel Vorndran / DXR [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>), via Wikimedia Commons])

"Gather the grand sights of heaven and earth" (*ji tiandi daguan* 極天地大觀). They point to Ge Hong's desire to deeply observe all that the natural world had to offer, and also to obtain something from it, its vitality or essence. The questions that faced him were how to see what nature could truly offer and how properly to obtain such "aligned vitality."

A clue to the answers can be found in the unusual Chinese character that is used for the word "obtain." Normally written with the radical 礻 (meaning "to walk"), it is instead written with the radical 氵 (meaning "water"). This hints that obtaining the true vitality of the landscape is in some sense a fluid process. It does not involve grasping or extracting nature's power, but rather taking advantage of that power, allowing it to flow into the body and transform it. In this way, the vitality of the landscape is properly aligned with that of the individual and thus able to exert a properly transformative effect upon it.

The second half of the couplet points to another basic relationship between human beings and the natural world, that heaven and earth afford humans "great sights." Indeed, the Chinese character used here for a "sight" or an "observation" (*guan* 觀) is also used for a Daoist monastery. This term serves to indicate that a key element of Daoism involves observation as both a natural and a religious act. Many Daoist temples or observatories are located in sites of outstanding natural beauty that

afford practitioners the ability to "observe" the landscape that surrounds them. Although Daoist temples can be located in cities and other community spaces, the monastic tradition that continues to this day has generally favored high mountains and beautiful landscapes far from the busy life of the town. By observing the scenery, Daoists are perhaps better able to take advantage of the vitality that flows through the landscape, known in Chinese as the "Dao" or the "Way," aligning themselves with it and being transformed by it. To observe the Dao, therefore, is not simply to be a passive recipient of sensory data. It is to engage in an act of transformation, known in Chinese as "cultivating the Dao" (*xin dao*). Such an act of cultivation thus connects the outer landscape of mountains and streams (the Chinese term is *shanshui*) with an inner world of bones, viscera, blood, and breath, a landscape of the inner body nourished by the same vital energy, or *qi*, that flows through the earth.

This Daoist vision for human engagement with the natural world, at least as articulated by Ge Hong, is not directly concerned with "saving it" for its own sake. Indeed, for him, the notion that humans could possibly "save nature" would seem hubristic in the extreme. His idea was more accurately the reverse: that nature could save human beings from their own bodies. This pharmacological view of nature lies at the interface between the Daoist tradition and Chinese medicine. Indeed, Tu Youyou 屠呦呦 (b. 1930), who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 2015, cited Ge Hong's pharmacological work as a direct inspiration for her work in developing Artemisinin, a drug therapy for malaria.² To pursue such an approach to the environment thus means to pursue a view in which humans paradoxically recognize their dependence on the natural environment in order to transcend it. This relationship is one in which humans "cultivate Dao" through what I call an "ecology of cosmic power." This ecology recognizes the complexity of relations between human beings and their natural environment and cannot simply be reduced to the notion of "protecting" nature according to some preordained vision of its "authenticity."³ To allow the natural world to save human beings, however, requires an understanding of how the vitality of the human body is constituted by the vitality of the landscape. It also requires an openness to the notion that the natural world possesses to a certain degree its own subjectivity and its own agency. Indeed, to understand the Daoist approach to ethics and to the natural environment requires a deep investigation into the notion of nature's own subjectivity.

The Place of Nature

Daoism proposes a radical reversal of the way that modern human beings think about the natural world. Rather than understanding human beings as "subjects" who observe the "objective" world of nature, Daoism proposes that subjectivity is grounded in the Dao itself, the wellspring of cosmic creativity for a world of constant transformation. This does not mean that humans principally are "objects" upon which "nature" acts. This would be to suggest that they possess no genuine subjectivity, freedom, or agency, and this is certainly not what the Daoist tradition implies. But, this grounding of subjectivity in the Dao does pose a challenge to modern ideas about humans as individual, subjective agents. Since Descartes, the modern humanist imagination of the self has located subjectivity within the cognitive functioning of human beings. From this point of view, self-consciousness and the capacity to think freely and creatively take place in human minds. These rational abilities are not a function of our being "creatures of flesh," a quality that we share with other animals and "nature," but rather uniquely endowed in human beings by virtue of our mentality.

But if we now imagine that human subjectivity derives from or is in some way inherited or "modeled" from "nature," then this causes a profound shift in what we understand this nature to be. The capacity to think, imagine, and act freely in the world is not what sets humans apart from nature: it is what nature enables humans to do. To explain this shift more fully, I would like to propose that we examine the way we think about the "place" of nature. The basic argument here is that when modern humans imagine nature as object, they at the same time imagine nature as external to the body. By contrast, when Daoists imagine nature as subjective, they at the same time imagine nature as internal to the body. Positioning nature as subjectivity means that nature can be apprehended and experienced internally.

Nature as Environment

The very term "environment" suggests something that is around or about human subjects. In scientific literature, environmental factors are ones that are external to the operation of an organism or organization and that may exert some influence over it. In this sense, one may define

environmental elements as things that lie beyond the domain of subjectivity of the individual or organism. While humans can control their own bodies, for instance, through their subjective decision-making capacities, human bodies are still subject to the influence of external, environmental factors over which individuals have no control. Examples of this are the influence of the weather on emotions and being infected by viruses that contact the body. In these cases, the mind loses some subjective control over its body, a state that modernity normally pathologizes as "illness." The ultimate loss of subjectivity is, of course, death.

The perception of an environment or a world that surrounds us is thus key to the modern human sense of self. Subjectivity, or the sense of self, can be defined quite precisely as whatever is not "the environment." In Cartesian thinking, which has dominated the humanistic tradition of the modern West, this distinction between subjectivity and environment is also understood as a distinction between thought and matter. Human subjectivity is bound up with the ability to think, and from this perspective the Cartesian formula of "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am) can be understood with an emphasis on the first person singular of the two verbs: *I* think, therefore *I* am. My existence as a person depends upon my sense of myself as a subject who thinks about things. This sense of oneself located chiefly in the mental processes of cognition implies a contrast with the realm of things that is not "myself" and that does not "think." This unstated contrast is in fact the objective, material world that is cognized by the rational human mind. This "world" thus functions as the backdrop in front of which human subjectivity takes place, the neutral space from which the human mind stands out as intelligence that coalesces in one's sense of self. In modern terms, this world surrounds and delimits human subjectivity, and in fact constitutes our environment. To have a sense of self as thinking, rational ego, therefore, is always and already to imply the sense of a surrounding world, one from which the mind distinguishes itself by its capacity to think.

The Chinese philosophical tradition developed a comparable understanding of "the environment," in the term *ming* 命, which is commonly translated as "fate." In classical China, this term appears paired with the word for heaven (*tian* 天) in the binome *tianming* 天命, which is usually translated as "the mandate of heaven." The idea here is that certain aspects of the human social order are governed by factors that are external to human control, in effect environmental factors. This term was most commonly used to explain the fall of a dynasty. In this case, it was said

that "heaven" had "changed its mandate" and given the authority to rule to a new dynastic house. In classical Chinese philosophy, the term *tian* can be translated either as "heaven" or "nature" depending on the context. Its basic meaning, however, is the realm beyond the human that is seen as acting toward the human world in some way. When this is chiefly understood as the operations of the natural world, then it is more common to translate this term as nature; and when it is chiefly understood as the operations of a supernatural or divine power, then it is more common to translate the term as heaven.⁴ Crucially, however, the concept of heaven/nature implies that it has some kind of force or agential power. It is not simply a neutral background upon which humans project their own subjectivity, but rather a force to be reckoned and engaged with.

The overlapping of "nature" and "heaven" in the concept of *tian* is useful for understanding the relationship of nature and religion in Chinese thought. Inasmuch as this force or power beyond human control is envisaged as natural, in the modern sense of belonging to the empirically observable world of material objects, then the problem of the human condition is conceived as basically a technological one. It is the task of human beings to extend their subjectivity over this external world through technological innovation and engineering prowess so as to bring as much as possible of this "external world" into the domain of human subjective control. The closest analogy to this in the Western tradition is that of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who argued that the moral duty for human beings is "the enlargement of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible."⁵ His approach suggests that the environment should ideally possess no subjectivity itself, but rather be rendered thoroughly objective by the ordering power and discipline of human technological prowess. Here, the function of technology is precisely to de-subjectivize nature and to bring all of the natural world into the single order of "the environment."

Within the Chinese context, this approach to the natural world is summed up most clearly in the Maoist ideology of "defeating" nature/heaven through the collective deployment of the human will. Here, it is not so much technological prowess that marks the unique capability of human beings, but rather the collective will of humanity to reshape the world to its own advantage.⁶

The concept of *tian* as heaven/nature also opens the possibility for what in modern terms would be understood as a religious response to the question of the subjectivity of the environment. This possibility arises

when the dominant form of nonhuman agency is envisaged as chiefly supernatural in the modern sense of belonging to an immaterial world of invisible, culturally postulated superhuman agents. From this perspective, the task of human beings is either to submit absolutely to this external power or force or to negotiate with or otherwise attempt to change the "will of God." The former position, that of submission, is essentially the main theological insight of Islam. In Islamic theology, God alone is great, and the task for human beings is submission, or compliance with his laws. This is the basic meaning of the term "Islam," which in Islamic theology thus leads to the related condition of peace or harmony (*salam*; cf. Hebrew *shalom*). The chief task for human beings is to figure out how to live those laws, a task known in the Islamic world as *fiqh*, or jurisprudence. In this sense, the power of God is certainly a subjective power, in that God demonstrates intention toward and consciousness of human life; but it is not a natural power in the sense of being located in the empirically observable world of the created order.⁷

The theological alternative to Islamic submission to supernatural subjective power is the mode of religious activity commonly understood as petitionary prayer, in which religious actors attempt to engage with supernatural subjective powers and exhort them to actions that are advantageous to the religious actors. In this case, religious people attempt to change the course of "fate" through their religious actions, so as to bring about healing, or wealth, or peace, or whatever material or spiritual goal they desire. An examination of any religious system will likely reveal the presence of both of these religious responses, even though they are theoretically self-contradictory. Religions are complex and messy cultural systems and tend to embrace contradictory forms in practice. But in both of these basic religious responses of submission on the one hand and negotiation on the other, we can see that they are a response to the perception of an agency and a subjectivity that are culturally postulated as supernatural.

The sense of an environment as a realm beyond the subjectivity of the individual, therefore, favors two broad cultural responses, which can be divided in the modern social imagination into "technology" and "religion." Bacon best characterizes the idea of technological imperialism, in which the human task is to bring as much of nature's powers under the technological control of human society. The second can basically be characterized as a religious response: either submitting to God's will or attempting to bring the divine realm under the control of the individual agent.

Since the Chinese word *tian* can be characterized as either nature or heaven, this term provides a way to see how nature and religion overlap. An example of this can be found in the preface to Judith Shapiro's book *Mao's War Against Nature*, which opens with a quotation from a Communist revolutionary song: "Let's attack here! Drive away the mountain gods, break down the stone walls, to bring out those 200 million tons of coal."⁸ In this song, the goal of bringing out the coal involves an attack on both the physical landscape through mining and on the theological landscape, by destroying the cultural power of the gods to protect the mountains they inhabit. Here, nature and religion are brought together in the struggle of the human will against the subjective powers of heaven/nature that threaten its existence.

The experience of being conditioned by environmental factors that have the power to influence and shape one's life is likely universal across cultures. But, as seen in the previous examples from Chinese and Western history, the precise way that this environmentalism is experienced and imagined can vary. Within the modern social imagination, this environmentalism can be posited as natural objects or supernatural subjects and can lend itself to the development of technological mastery or religious culture. This leads to two conclusions that are, from the modern perspective, completely obvious. The first is that nature should fundamentally be conceived as our "environment," as the space around us that lies beyond our own sense of self, our own subjectivity. Secondly, the same applies to the supernatural realm of subjective powers: gods, conceived as environmental factors that have some power or influence over human lives, are also external to our own sense of self, our own subjectivity. The Chinese concept of "humans must defeat nature/heaven" (*ren ding sheng tian*), however, demonstrates the way in which the technological and theological realms overlap.

From these examples, we can more easily see how the modern sense of the "natural" environment and the "theological" environment is in fact a social, historical construction. As a result, it is neither necessary nor inevitable that human beings should imagine the natural and supernatural realms as external to the sense of themselves as individual subjects or as fundamentally separate from each other.

To understand how the Daoist tradition has approached this way of imagining nature and heaven requires an investigation of the foundation of the Daoist tradition, namely, the idea of Dao, or Way. The best place to start is the *Daode jing*, the foundational Daoist text whose title is often

translated into English as *The Way and Its Power*. Consisting of eighty-one short chapters in aphoristic style, the text records various sayings attributed to a mythical figure known simply as the Old Master, in Chinese, Laozi 老子. Chapter 25 of the standard edition of this text contains perhaps the most famous cosmological statement:

Humans follow earth
Earth follows heaven
Heaven follows Dao
Dao follows its subjective nature.⁹

Here, the three realms of human, nature, and the transcendent cosmos are not understood as absolutely distinct spaces. Rather, they are related in that they follow from or are normatively modeled (the Chinese term is *fa* 法) on one another in a process of hierarchical creativity. The ultimate norm for this process is Dao itself. Dao is not modeled on or dependent upon anything else. Rather, it takes its own self-creativity or self-emergence as its norm. The three "realms" of human, nature, and supernatural are folded into a hierarchy, whose ultimate ground is Dao, which is understood in this text as a recursive process or pattern of creative self-emergence. This Daoist model differs from the modern Western cultural imagination of three distinct spaces to the "world." It proposes first of all that the three dimensions of humans, earth, and heaven are related through a process of "normative modeling," or "following" (*fa*). Secondly, it proposes that all these dimensions are to be understood as following Dao, which does not have any ground or foundation; Dao, rather, is a creative process of self-emergence.

From this Daoist perspective, the modern cultural imagination of humanity, nature, and the supernatural as three distinct, and ideally non-overlapping realms, is very hard to grasp. Firstly, this text sees that these three realms depend on or follow from one another. They are not truly distinct or separate but share some fundamental pattern or model that relates them. The activity of one domain will thus be significant for the other domains, especially given that what is essential about human life is the way it models or is patterned on natural life, rather than the way it stands out from or distinguishes itself from nature. As a consequence, nature, if we understand this as "the earth" in the terms of the *Daode jing*, is not something that we can grasp objectively. From this perspective, contrary to what our senses tell us, the earth does not lie outside us as an

object to be perceived, manipulated, or indeed preserved or "saved." Rather, it is something that patterns, models, or informs us as human beings. And if we understand this patterning or modeling in its ultimate sense as the Dao, then we can say that the Dao is the ground of ultimate subjectivity. This basic meaning of the fourth line of this phrase is that there is nothing to which Dao itself is subject. Instead, Dao is the ground of subjectivity itself: it is the power of things to be autonomous, self-governing, and self-creating.

The classical scientific imagination of nature in modernity is precisely the reverse of this: only human beings possess subjectivity; only human beings are capable of understanding and creating themselves, and of deciding what to do and when. Nature, by contrast, is ideally objective, passively following "laws" and not having any capacity to shape or create itself. The Daoist view presented in the *Daodejing* is basically an alternative to this imagination of nature. The ultimate ground of subjectivity is the Dao; this Dao is the model or pattern for the heavens; the heavens are the model or pattern for the earth; the earth is the model or pattern for humans. The fact that humans possess subjectivity, an individual sense of self, an identity, and a consciousness, is grounded in their emergence from within the world of nature, understood as the earth, heavens, and Dao. That humans possess autonomy and subjectivity is not something that makes them different from nature but rather is precisely what they inherit from the earth. It is "nature itself" that shapes, transforms, and emerges. That humans also shape, transform, and emerge is due to their inheritance of these capacities, not due to their distinction from the "background" of the natural world. Ultimately, human subjectivity, from a Daoist perspective, is rooted in the subjectivity of nature, which is rooted ultimately in the Dao as the recursive process of self-creation.

The modern social imagination focuses on nature as law or pattern in its most "natural" state and is thus forced to come up with a theory to explain how change or transformation within nature takes place (evolution). The Daoist social imagination, by contrast, focuses on nature as subjectivity in its most natural state and conversely is forced to come up with a theory to explain how patterns and regularity take place. The consequence of this basic difference between the classical Daoist and modern Western social imaginations is profound. Whereas the latter regards humans as unique or special precisely because of their subjectivity, consciousness, and individuality, the former regards humans as fundamentally natural (or uninteresting) because of their subjectivity, consciousness,

and individuality. Humans do not stand out from the natural world because of their subjectivity; their subjectivity is precisely derived from or modeled on (*fā*) "nature" because Dao in itself is subjectivity. Dao is not subject to any higher law or pattern but is self-generating, spontaneous, and ultimately free. Inasmuch as humans grasp this subjectivity for themselves, or, in Daoist terms, "obtain the Dao" (*dédao* 得道), they are in fact grasping what it means to be rooted in Dao.

As a consequence, the basic model for nature advertised in this text is not premised on an idea of creation, in which one entity, A, may be said to "create" another entity, B. Rather, the normative relationship between different dimensions of the cosmos is that of modeling. The Dao does not create the world, or human beings, in the way that the Jewish-Christian-Islamic God is said to have created the world. Instead, it models subjectivity, the power of self-creation. Inasmuch as "nature" models this power of self-creation, it is "natural." And the same is true for human beings.

The question that arises from this is how we can see this subjectivity in nature: where is it genuinely evident? The answer lies in understanding nature not as a collection of objects that mechanically follow laws or patterns that they do not understand. It requires us to understand nature from the perspective of evolution. That is to say, what is most remarkably "natural" about "nature" is that it constantly evolves, generating new and complex forms and species. From the perspective of evolution, nature truly is subjective. It is a self-generating, creative power, especially when viewed from the perspective of cosmic evolution. When understood as a process of emergence over 13.7 billion years, the raw power of nature from the big bang to the evolution of life on earth can be seen as nothing but sheer, overwhelming subjectivity. As Swinme and Tucker note, "With our empirical observations expanded by modern science, we are now realizing that our universe is a single immense energy event that began as a tiny speck that has unfolded over time to become galaxies and stars, palms and pelicans, the music of Bach, and each of us alive today."¹⁰ From this perspective, it is impossible to imagine that humans somehow "stand out" from nature or are distinguished from nature by their possession of "consciousness," "feelings," or capacity for self-determination. Rather, their possession of subjectivity is their natural state.

This argument constitutes something of a challenge not only to the modern imagination of nature, but also to contemporary discourse regarding the environment. Later Daoist alchemy came to sum up this notion in a phrase that is quite shocking to the modern imagination. It says,

"My fate lies within me, and not within the heavens/nature" (wo ming zai wo bu zai tian 我命在我不在天). This remarkable phrase calls attention to a Daoist social imagination in which the complex of environmental factors known as "fate" are not to be imagined as being located within the "heavens" or indeed the realm of "nature" but rather within the individual subject (wo 我). That is to say, the "environment" is not external to the self, but located within the self (zai wo 在我). Furthermore, this Daoist concept of "environment," or "fate," encompasses what in modern terms we understand as both "nature" and "gods." In fact, one of the chief characteristics of the Daoist cultural imagination is that both the natural world and the theological world came to be envisioned as interior to the body of the Daoist practitioner.¹¹

Nature as Insistence

The environmental character of nature, the notion that nature is all around us acting on us in ways beyond our control was, in the Daoist cultural imagination that emerged in China's middle ages (from the end of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. to the beginning of the Ming dynasty in 1368 C.E.), replaced with an alternative character that I refer to as nature's "insistence." What I mean by this term is that Daoists developed an understanding as to what we moderns term nature, and also what we moderns term gods, not as beings or spaces that exist beyond the realm of human bodies, as it were, "out there," but rather as subjectivities that "insist" or "dwell within" the space of the body.

From this perspective, to possess some individual subjectivity is not to assert some existential uniqueness over and against an undifferentiated chaotic mass but rather to embody the subjective powers of Dao that have come together to inform each unique being. To be an individual is not to be distinguished from the world by virtue of some unique characteristic that "nature" does not possess. Instead, the subjectivity of nature insists in or informs the subjectivity of the individual; the uniqueness of each individual life, and the uniqueness of the human species, are constituted by how specifically the Dao is configured or constellated within each life.

Up to now, this Daoist view has largely been understood from the perspective of what it has to say about the relationship between human beings and gods. But in fact, this viewpoint has an important consequence for how human beings imagine the natural environment. Rather than

providing a neutral backdrop for human life and action, the environment in this Daoist sense is within human beings, not external to them.

An example can be seen in a Daoist visualization text known as the *Scripture on Inner Observation* (Neiguan jing 內觀經; DZ841):

Heaven and earth mingle their essences; yin and yang engage in interchange. Thus myriad beings come to life, each receiving a particular life: yet all are alike in that they have a share in the life-giving Dao.

When a father and mother unite in harmony, man receives life.

In the first month, essence and blood coagulate in the womb.

In the second month, the embryo begins to take shape.

In the third month, the yang spirit arouses the three spirit souls to come to life.

In the fourth month, the yin energy settles the seven material souls as guardians of the body.

In the fifth month, the five phases are distributed to the five orbs to keep their spirit at peace.

In the sixth month, the six pitches are set up in the six intestines nourishing the vital energy.

In the seventh month, the seven essential stars open the body orifices to let the light in.

In the eighth month, the eight luminants descend with their true vital energy.

In the ninth month, the various palaces and chambers are properly arranged to keep the essence safe.

In the tenth month, the energy is strong enough to complete the image.¹²

This passage describes the gestation of the fetus over a period of ten lunar months as an act of infusion, indwelling, or "insistence" of cosmic powers. Very likely, it was used as a form of meditation in which the practitioner aims to create for him- or herself an "immortal body." It describes how the various elements of the body, including both "material" and "spiritual" aspects, are formed not simply by the act of intercourse of the parents, but by the infusion of a whole array of cosmological elements. Yin, yang, stars, the five "phases" or elements, cosmic sounds, and the seven stars of the Big Dipper (Ursa Major) combine to inform the particularity of an individual life. From this perspective, we can say that nature does not surround or exist beyond the subjectivity of human life. Rather,

the environment is something that ideally insists within the subjectivity of human lives. In fact, it is precisely because the creative powers of the cosmos insist within human life that human subjectivity is possible. From this Daoist perspective, the creation of life is not to be understood as life coming to "exist" in the sense of stand out or emerge from some background. Instead, life is a process of infusion or insistence in which the subjective powers of the cosmos transform and combine to inform the unique nature of the new individual.

The description of the gestation of the fetus found in this text can be taken as a further explication of the idea of "normative modeling" (*fa*) contained in chapter 25 of the *Daode jing*. The Dao is in essence a self-creating process of self-creation. This process infuses the heavens, the earth, and human life in ever more complex patterns, forming the individual lives, creative possibilities, and self-conscious subjectivities of human beings. Neither the *Daode jing* nor the *Scripture on Inner Observation* views this as a process of creation out of nothing, but rather as a process of "information," or as I term it "insistence." The end of this process is that the ideal individual "completes the image" or is born. But his or her uniqueness is informed by the process of creative modeling that is supplied by the subjective powers of the cosmos, and it is ultimately grounded in the autonomous self-creative power of the Dao itself.

Texts like the *Scripture on Inner Observation* can be read not only as documenting a unique Daoist religious sensibility. They can also be read as a way to understand the environment not as something that exists objectively outside us, but as something that insists subjectively within us. This way of imagining the environment is deeply transgressive of our modern, scientific understanding of nature, and of our modern sense of human consciousness and subjectivity. Throughout this book, I explain how this sense of nature's subjectivity runs through the Daoist tradition like a deep, creative thread, and I also attempt to explain how this view may be relevant for the contemporary world. For now, however, I turn to explore the second important consequence of this Daoist worldview, which concerns agency.

The Agency of Nature

Thus far I have sketched the outlines of a Daoist theory of nature as subjectivity. This is, in essence, my way of teasing out the implication

of the famous Daoist concept of "Dao following its own subjectivity" (Dao fa ziran 道法自然). In the previous section, I explored the surprising notion that emerges from this: that nature should not be grasped principally as an objective world that exists beyond the hermetically sealed walls of the body, but rather grasped subjectively as a world that insists within the body. This sense of subjectivity, or self-mastery of one's fate, might give the impression that Daoism is an egotistical religion devoted to the cultivation of self and a relative disdain of others. In fact, it is a common and quite fundamental misconception of Daoism that it advocates a life of individualism, detached from ethical concern for everyday society or the natural environment. The reason for this misconception has to do with a misunderstanding of the proper relationship between self and world in the Daoist imagination, understood ideally by the term *wuwei* 無為, conventionally translated as "nonaction" or "effortless action."

Nonaction and Catalysis

The concept of *wuwei* is one of the most significant and pervasive motifs within Daoism. It points first and foremost to an ideal way of acting within the world; it is intrinsically connected to the concept of the subjectivity of nature (discussed previously), and it points toward a Daoist theory of religious and ethical action, as I hope to argue in the subsequent chapters. For now I would like to explain the basic meaning of this term, as it appears in a famous passage in the *Daode jing* (chap. 57):

I do nothing
And people transform themselves
I practice tranquility
And people align themselves
I have no involvement in affairs
And people prosper themselves
I have no desires
And people simplify themselves

As this passage makes clear, the *Daode jing* is not here advocating some kind of individualistic detachment from the world of affairs. It is advocating instead an ethic of relationship between the self (*wo* 我) and the people (*min* 民) in which the nonaction of the former facilitates the spontaneous

self-transformation of the latter. In each case, "I" do not do something, with the consequence that the "people" of their own accord are spontaneously transformed, governed, and made prosperous and simple, meaning authentic.

The praxis that this passage advocates is best understood by analogy with the process of catalysis. A catalyst is a substance that enables a chemical reaction to take place at a higher rate but does not itself take part in the reaction and is not, as a result, consumed by the reaction. In the case of the previous passage, the work is not performed by the "I" but is something that takes place spontaneously within the people. In each case, the consequence of the (non)activity of the "I" is that the people transform, align, prosper, and simplify themselves (*zi* 自). The crucial question here is where does the energy come from? By what means does this widespread social transformation take place? The answer is that it does not lie within the subjectivity of the individual self, the *wo* or *ego* of the Daoist sage. It is not through that person's "work" that transformation is achieved. Rather, it is through his or her withdrawal from work, or, as the text puts it, through nonaction, that change emerges spontaneously among the other people.

The theory that underlies this way of acting is quite clear: the subjectivity that emerges from the unfathomable Dao is a creative, transformative subjectivity. At its heart, it is the capacity to change, transform, and be creative. It follows from this that in order to facilitate change, transformation, and creativity among the people, and by extension within the world, the mode of praxis for the Daoist should be that of a catalyst rather than a worker, enabling the transformative power of the Dao to work spontaneously and creatively in the multiple subjectivities of the surrounding world.

This ethical dimension to this theory of action comes from the fact that only certain types of work are produced spontaneously by the subjective power grounded in the Dao. In this case, four are mentioned: self-transformation (*zihua* 自化), self-alignment (*zizheng* 自正), self-prosperity (*zifu* 自富), and self-simplicity (*ziru* 自樸). These four aspects of the subjective agency of the Dao are thus to be understood as the proper goals of Daoist ethical activity and are to be achieved through nonaction by the catalytic agent.

From this passage, we can thus begin to understand that Daoist ethics are derived from an understanding of the basic functioning of the Dao as the ground of subjectivity and agency inherent within things in the natural

world. Given that agency does not derive from an ultimate creator figure or divine lawmaker but is rather inherent within the subjectivity of things, the goal of the Daoist is, to put it positively, to catalyze creative transformation within things, in this case, the "people" (*min* 民). Put negatively, the goal of the Daoist is to avoid doing anything that might inhibit the subjective agency inherent within things. This mode of agency, or way of acting (though agency is not, strictly speaking, the right word here), should be understood by contrast to two opposing views.

First, this view of agency is to be distinguished from the concept of conformity with divine laws. In this latter view, ethical action is understood as action that conforms most closely to the laws of a divine creator. From this mode of creation, and this view of nature, come the idea that submission to, or faithful following of, the mandated laws is the best guarantee of ethical action. For this reason it is no surprise that theologies of divine creation entail ethics encoded in divine laws.

At the same time, the Daoist view of ethical action should be distinguished from that of absolute relativism or perspectivalism, in which there is no basis for judging the value of an action except from the perspective of the one making the action. The Daoist tradition advocates clear ethical goals that derive from the view that the subjective agency of the Dao tends toward the creation of ideal states, listed here as the four goals of ethical action: transformation, alignment, prosperity, and simplicity.

Inasmuch as the "nonactions" of the individual tend to further these goals in the world around, they are consistent with Dao itself understood as spontaneous creative power. In this case, they produce transformation rather than stasis, alignment rather than discord, prosperity rather than poverty, and authentic simplicity rather than spurious adornment. These values, grounded in the creative power of the Dao, are natural values in that they derive from the natural power of subjectivity that emerges from the Dao.

How, then, are we to understand the negative characteristic of the Daoist mode of action? Why is it that the catalytic acts of the Daoist are understood as nonaction, and how is the concept of nonaction related to the parallel "no-" concepts of "no-knowledge" (*wuzhi* 無知) or "no-desires" (*wuyu* 無欲)? The answer lies in locating the creative power of transformation. According to a Daoist understanding of the world, this creative power resides in the subjectivities of things themselves. Just as the catalyst does not participate directly in the reaction that it catalyzes, so also the Daoist facilitates transformation without directly participating in the

transformation. This can make sense only if we understand the world beyond the ego to be a world of subjectivity and agency rather than a world of objectivity and passivity. In this regard, action is not about imposing the vision of the ego upon an objective world as a passive recipient, but involves unleashing the creative powers of the world understood as a complex of subjective agencies. To do so means, in part, deferring to and responsively channeling those subjectivities rather than subduing them by violence, power, or discipline. The belief of the Daoist is that the way of nonaction amid a world of transformative subjectivity is far more effective than the way of action upon a world of passive matter, at least when it comes to producing transformation, alignment, prosperity, and simplicity.

For this reason, the Daoist mode of agency can best be understood by the term "transaction," rather than "action" or "nonaction." The word "action" suggests that a subjective actor exercises power over an objective world shaping it according to his or her desires; clearly, this is not the view supported by the Daoist text. It would also be unhelpful to call the Daoist mode of praxis "nonaction," because this suggests that no work is produced. As the text from the *Daode jing* makes clear, transformation does take place and work is effectively done. From the perspective of subject ("I"), this seems to be nonaction, and it is not perceived by the world, or people, as the exercise of agency by an other. Rather, it is perceived by them as self-transformation or the spontaneous operation of their own subjectivity.

One approach in the West has been to designate this kind of action as "effortless" action, implying that the actor achieves his goal with the maximum of skill and the minimum of effort.¹³ My approach, however, is to think about agency that does not derive from the mind or brain of an individual subject but rather is distributed among the subjectivities of the world that constitute the field of action where transformation takes place. This is the reason for understanding Daoist modes of action, including ritual action and ethical action, fundamentally as types of "transaction." I use this term in two senses. The first sense is that of an exchange in which the activity of A toward B results in the activity of B toward A. There is no such thing here as a one-way action. Actions always entail some kind of reaction. But the more subtle and deeper sense of my use of the term transaction is to undermine the sense of individual subjective agents who project agency onto an objective world. Agency ought to be understood as being distributed among the various subjectivities of the field where action takes place. In this case, it makes little sense to speak

of an individual agent or an individual action. Instead, all actions are transactions that mediate among the various subjectivities of the world, enabling the spontaneous creativity of the Dao that insists within all subjectivities.

Here, it may be instructive to refer to Karen Barad's concept of "intra-actions." In Barad's understanding, based on her reading of Bohr's quantum physics, the boundaries between subject and object only become determinate through "specific agential intra-actions."¹⁴ That is to say, the performance of an "agential cut" brings into being the specific, local relations of subjects and objects. These boundaries do not reside a priori in things, but rather are performed by agents. Although I am not able to read into Daoist texts the same level of metaphysical specificity that Barad identifies here, "transaction" and "intra-action" both serve to disrupt modern notions of subjectivity and objectivity, and in particular traditional notions of causality.

In the *Daode jing*, this mode of transaction rather than subjective action over an objective world is further explained in the passage in terms of "practicing tranquility," "no-involvement," and "no-desires." These terms, I believe, are further examples of what Daoist transactional agency entails and are related to the types of meditative activity that the Daoist tradition promotes. "Tranquility" positively denotes a mode of meditative action that repeatedly appears as a core value in Daoist traditions. In this passage, it functions so as to catalyze harmonious alignment (*zheng 正*) among the people. As a consequence of the spontaneous emergence of alignment, it becomes less necessary for the Daoist to manage others through direct involvement or interference in their affairs. As a result, noninvolvement or noninterference in affairs (*wushi 無事*) denotes an ideal way to achieve flourishing or prosperity (*fu 富*) among the people. Finally, the diminishment rather than expansion of desires on the part of the Daoist provides a way to attain an authentic simplicity rather than an unnatural or spurious adornment that adds nothing to the proper flourishing of creativity that lies within the subjective agency of each thing.

Praxis and Cultivation

The Daoist way of transaction, and its emphasis on the cultivation of tranquility, the diminishment of desire, and noninterference in things, should not be interpreted as the withdrawal or detachment from

the world as an end in itself. Rather, these nonactions are to be understood as transactions that catalyze transformation in the world around. In the Daoist tradition, this transaction came to be understood through the agricultural metaphor of "cultivation" (*xiu* 修). Just as the farmer does not "cause" his or her crops to grow by projecting subjective agency onto them, but rather by providing them with the environment and nourishment in which their natural potency can flourish, so also the activity of the Daoist can be understood basically as a kind of cultivation.

A typical category for understanding spiritual activity is that of self-cultivation in which the religious person achieves some kind of perfection and growth through participation in various spiritual exercises. This is just as true of Daoism as it is of other religious traditions. But the Daoist tradition also came to understand cultivation practice as "cultivating the Dao" (*xiu dao*), which stands as an intriguing alternative to the traditional understanding of religious activity as something that affects principally the subjective religious actor. In this Daoist phrase, the "object" of cultivation is that of the Dao itself, which we can understand as the root of creative self-transformation. In this case, the Daoist who cultivates the Dao only indirectly cultivates his or her own subjectivity. Rather, the Daoist works to enable the transformative power of the Dao itself, just as the farmer works to enable the transformative power that lies within and among the complex of agencies including the crops, soil, water, and so on. In this way, we can begin to see that the Daoist idea of cultivation in fact draws on the concept of nonaction (*wuwei*) in the *Daode jing*. The prototypical Daoist in the *Daode jing* "does nothing" and yet the people "transform themselves." This transaction can be understood as a mode of cultivating the Dao in which the nonactions of the Daoist facilitate the spontaneous self-transformation of the people.

So far, I have attempted to explain Daoism as a framework for understanding the subjectivity of nature, the place of nature, and the way of action that ideally should obtain between the individual and his or her context. It is my contention that this framework provides a way to understand certain key features of Daoist religious actions and also to understand Daoist concerns with place, environment, and cosmos. These approaches to what we moderns consider "religion" and "nature" constitute the basis for an ecological spirituality and an environmental ethic with profound consequences for the contemporary world.

3 Liquid Ecology

To say that the natural world possesses subjectivity, that it should be considered not as a neutral backdrop to human existence, but as informing or indwelling human life, is to draw the outlines of a system of ecological relationships in which the existence of one thing is connected to the existence of other things. This relationship does not necessarily imply a grand metaphysical unity of all creation, but it does imply that the life and livelihood of one thing cannot be considered in absolute isolation. Moreover, if the "insistence" of the world functions as a primary metaphor for considering how things are, then it should be clear that instead of thinking about the way that something is in the world, one should rather think of the way the world is in something. In effect, it is to argue that humans are fundamentally "worlded" beings, not so much in Althusser's sense of being "interpellated" by social forces, but rather in the sense of being "insisted upon" by the vital forces constellated in the local environment and the larger cosmos.¹ This does not mean that human beings are not subjects that act upon the world, but it does mean that human life should principally be considered as something derived from the world that it inhabits, and that the biosphere is ontologically prior to human life. To live with this realization is to live within a profound social