

Ecology and the Classics: New Grounds for Environmental Protection

Mary Evelyn Tucker*



Introduction: Defining Terms and Context

In a world where eco-systems are unraveling at an unprecedented rate and where one in four mammalian species may go extinct in the next few decades, there are few places on Earth where environmental problems are of greater concern than China. The sheer size of the population, over a billion people, and the rapid speed of modernization are creating a collision course for a sustainable future. This is affecting not only China but also the entire world. Our interconnected global markets, trade, cultural exchange, and travel are pushing us up against one another as never before. The way China resolves its environmental problems may have an immense affect around the globe. There are many signs now that these problems are being felt strongly in China with some 60,000 protests a year occurring and with government officials recognizing that the

prized Confucian value of social and political harmony may be eluding them. Clearly some new approaches are needed that are not simply punitive, drawing on traditional Chinese Legalism. Rather, many are looking to Confucianism and other Chinese traditions for a humanistic approach that would create new grounds for environmental protection. How to do this is a challenge. But we have precedents for reading classical texts in the West as sources of creating more humanistic societies and more democratic governments. Now we need to create something even more encompassing, namely, ecological cultures that will endure into the centuries ahead. New readings of the Chinese classics are part of what is emerging. This will inevitably have resonance in both China and in the West.

In the United States, the long-standing commitment in higher education to studying classical texts as part of a liberal arts education

* Research Lecturer, School of Forestry / Environmental Studies and School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University; PhD in East Asian traditions from Columbia University specializing in Neo-Confucianism. For further information, please contact the website: <http://www.yale.edu/religionandecology>

has had a distinguished history at many universities. Columbia and the University of Chicago especially come to mind. While this commitment originated with the Western classics, it has also been extended to the Asian classics, thanks in large measure to the pioneering work of William Theodore de Bary at Columbia. There the core courses on Western civilization and cultures have their counterparts in courses on Asian civilization and cultures. With de Bary's leadership and persistence, this Asian program has emerged over some five decades with a remarkable translation of texts and with careful attention to shaping and staffing undergraduate courses.

In this paper I want to suggest another phase of interpreting these texts is coming into being. They are being read not only as humanistic classics, but also as ecological classics. In this context they offer insight into views of nature and the cosmos in Asia as well as perspectives on human-Earth relations. We will explore ways in which these Asian texts might be approached as ecological classics, with all the attendant challenges that implies. We recognize from the outset this is not a simple process, but requires examination, discussion, and contestation with careful attention to differences of time, place, and circumstances. Moreover, we acknowledge that there is a vast gap between traditional texts and contemporary ecological problems. Nor are we trying to idealize Asian classics as inherently nature-friendly. More complex reflection is clearly required.

The context for our discussions of the classics in the West today is not only for personal self-cultivation, moral edification, or social harmony. These discussions arise in a search for a larger sense of the common good for the Earth community as a whole. Just as many core curricula in the West arose out of key twentieth century questions regarding war, peace, and

human rights, so now a reading of the classics in the twenty first century requires us to respond to the global ecological crisis we are facing. For this is the largest crisis humans have ever had to face. Climate change, species extinction, and massive pollution of our air, water, and soil are threatening the viability of the very life systems of the planet. As some have observed, because of this crisis, civilization itself is at stake. We are the first generation of humans to wonder if we too are an endangered species. Surely what is required is a dialogue among civilizations that draws on traditional cultures and begins to identify the common yet differentiated values for a sustainable future.

Many are realizing that the ecological crisis is also a crisis of culture and of the human spirit. They are asking what kinds of traditional values will shape ecological ethics in different cultural contexts? As China modernizes with an unprecedented rapidity, the destruction of the environment is becoming increasingly visible and ever more alarming. What, then, do the Chinese classics in particular have to say to this massive crisis that we cannot afford to ignore? What kind of inspiration can be drawn from Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist classics for a Chinese ecological ethics?

The timeliness of this last question is evident as even the Vice Minister of China's State Environmental Protection Administration, Pan Yue, is calling for such ecological ethics to be identified from Chinese traditional thought. He writes: "Why is environmental protection considered a cultural issue? One of the core principles of traditional Chinese culture is that of harmony between humans and nature. Different philosophies all emphasize the political wisdom of a balanced environment. Whether it is the Confucian idea of humans and nature becoming one, the Daoist view of the Dao reflecting nature,

or the Buddhist belief that all living things are equal, Chinese philosophy has helped our culture to survive for thousands of years. It can be a powerful weapon in preventing an environmental crisis and building a harmonious society."

Pan Yue is calling for the creation of an ecological culture in China and an ecological civilization for the world. He observes that environmental laws are on the books in China, but they cannot be enforced because there is not an ecological culture to support them. (This situation applies to the West as well.) My suggestion in this talk is that an ecological culture may be created in part, as Pan Yue has observed, by drawing on Chinese thought and values to respond to the present critical state of the ecological crisis in China.

This interest in traditional values and ecological thinking is growing in many quarters within China. In fact, the Harvard volumes on Confucianism and Ecology, Daoism and Ecology, and Buddhism and Ecology have been translated into Chinese and published in the People's Republic of China. There are plans to translate the other volumes in the Harvard series. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is eager to sponsor a conference on the topic of religion and ecology through their Institute for the Study of World Religions. Several universities have expressed interest in holding conferences on this topic. Pan Yue is hoping to sponsor a discussion of these issues through the NGO he established, China Environmental Cultural Promotion Association.

This can be seen within the broader context of the revival of religions traditions in China since religious tolerance was promulgated in the early 1980s. Since that time the interest in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism has been strong and many of the writings of Tu Weiming, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Roger Ames and others are being translated and read in China and across

the East Asian world. The revival of traditional thought within modernity is of growing interest in China. It is here that Chinese classics have an important role to play in developing a dialogue among civilizations.

First some clarification is in order regarding the term "ecology". In these considerations I prefer to use the term "ecology" rather than "environment." The word environment can imply the study of the environment as an objective reality "out there." It can refer to a strictly scientific investigation of the environment apart from humans. Moreover, the term "environmentalism" is often associated with activism or advocacy of particular positions regarding environmental protection or use of resources. Ecology, on the other hand, is a broader and more inclusive term. It suggests the interconnected study of nature, species, and dynamic ecosystems from a scientific, ecological perspective. But it also embraces the study of human interactions with nature that we might describe as humanistic ecology. This broad area includes social ecology, cultural ecology, and religious ecology. It also can refer to emerging fields in the social sciences such as ecological economics and green politics.

Methods of Investigating Ecology and the Classics: The Grounds for Dialogue

There are three possible approaches to studying the intersection of ecological concerns and classical texts. First we can examine texts by individual religious traditions to understand their views of nature and human-Earth relations. Secondly, we can make comparisons and contrasts across traditions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in East Asia. Finally, we can also study texts by comparison across major civilizations such as Asia and the West. We can trace influences on key thinkers, such as Chinese Confucianism on several of the Enlightenment

thinkers. Here we will highlight the first approach that we used in the Harvard research project. We will also suggest how the second approach could be helpful in the teaching of classical texts across traditions in East Asia.

The first approach, studying individual religious traditions, is what we used in the Harvard conference series on world religions and ecology from 1996-1998. Out of this arose ten volumes published from 1997-2004 and an international website constructed from 2001-2007 (<http://www.yale.edu/religionandecology>) Over a three year period my husband, John Grim and I, along with a team of area specialists, brought together some 800 scholars and environmentalists in a ten part conference series at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions. For this project I was influenced by my earlier studies of the Asian classics and by an appreciation of their contemporary relevance. This was fostered through the perspective of three remarkable teachers.

I drew on the close reading of texts and traditions that Wm. Theodore de Bary encouraged in my graduate studies in East Asian religions at Columbia. Without the broad understanding and careful training in the Asian classics that the Columbia program fostered, the Harvard project on world religions and ecology would not have been possible. In addition, I was inspired by the concerns of the historian of religions, Thomas Berry, who was keenly aware of the looming environmental crisis, and especially its effects in China and India as they began to modernize. His interpretation of these religious traditions as relevant to modern problems was also indispensable. Moreover, I was moved by the Harvard Confucian scholar, Tu Weiming, who called for a reinterpretation of the Enlightenment mentality through the resources of the world's religions. His understanding of the reconfiguration

of traditions within the context of modernity was indispensable in our efforts at retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction of religious traditions in light of the ecological crisis. All of these were major factors in formulating and guiding the conference series and subsequent publications. They continue to be base notes in imaging an effective dialogue among civilizations for a sustainable future.

The Harvard conference series tried to draw on a careful reading of texts and traditions, acknowledging that they were formulated in a different time, place, and circumstance. The gap between traditional context and modern ecological problems was recognized. Moreover, there was no assumption that ideal views of nature, such as we see in many of the classical Asian texts, assumes that the environment was not destroyed in Asia. In this respect China is no exception as it had deforested its landscape well before the modern period. The gap between theory and practice can be acknowledged. Nonetheless, we assumed that we could draw on these classical texts because they reflect both timeless and timely concerns of the human spirit. They have been subject to scrutiny, debate, and reinterpretation over time and across cultures for different values and interests.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that scientific, legal, and policy approaches to the environmental crisis are necessary but not sufficient. James Gustave Speth, the Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has indicated this in his new book, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*.¹ He spent his entire career in legal and policy debates around environmental issues, founding the National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) and the World Resources Institute (WRI). In addition, he directed the United Nations

Development Program (UNDP). Speth is calling for moral and religious approaches to be included in the search for solutions to the ecological crisis.

A larger role for the humanities is now emerging in environmental studies. In literature this includes a renaissance of American nature writers and the emergence of eco-criticism. In history it includes environmental historians such as John McNeill who wrote a comprehensive history of environmentalism in the twentieth century and William Cronon who has written extensively of the complexity of human-nature relations. In philosophy there has arisen a robust thirty-year discussion of environmental ethics led by philosophers such as Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston. Since the Harvard conference series a new field of religion and ecology has emerged that has implications for policy. It acknowledges that a culture's views of nature are most often shaped by their religious traditions and these are contained primarily, although not exclusively, in classical texts. It is precisely this intersection of traditional thought and environmental policy that is beginning to emerge in China, thanks especially to the encouragement of Pan Yue.

Ecological Themes in Asian Classics

How can we study these texts across traditions attending to basic ecological themes? We can focus on human-Earth relations under three topics: Cosmology, nature, and cultivation.

While we will use examples from the key religious traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, we acknowledge that these traditions are not considered radically separate traditions, as

religions are seen in the west. In the Ming period, for example, there was a lively understanding of syncretism and exchange between and among traditions. This interaction led to a sense of shared yet differentiated values in East Asian religions.

Cosmology of interdependence

With the theme of cosmology we can observe various forms of interdependence in the Chinese classics. This includes interdependence within the vast web of life and interdependence regarding humans and nature. This can be viewed as a corrective to an exaggerated sense of independence in the modern west where individualism has given rise to a drive for freedom and rights often without the balance of responsibilities. It might be observed that interdependence in many of the Asian texts and traditions is both a given and a goal. It is an assumption and an achievement; both axiomatic and to be realized through practice.

In the Confucian and Neo-Confucian tradition the sense of interdependence is expressed as a cosmological filiality between Heaven, Earth and humans evident in early texts such as the Book of History. One of the most eloquent expressions of this sense of connection and care is in the *Western Inscription* of Zhang Zai:²

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

1 James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). This book arose out of the DeVane lectures that Dean Speth delivered at Yale in the spring term 2007.

2 William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (eds.), *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 683.

This reflects the unity of the 10,000 things. From humans to the whole of nature and to the cosmos itself there is a profound interrelation.

In the *Daodejing* of Laozi interdependence is expressed as the holistic flow that is continually renewing life. The Dao pervades and mysterious presence penetrates. The human enters the flow with non-purposive action (*wuwei*). One can thus return to the innocence and beauty of childhood. The power of passivity is celebrated with images such as the feminine, the flow of water, the ravine, or the vessel:³

Knowing the male, but keeping to
the female,
One may become a ravine to the
world.
Becoming a ravine to the world,
The constant virtue does not
depart;
One returns to the state of infancy.

In Mahayana Buddhism interdependence is expressed as radical interpenetration. This is evident in the *Heart Sutra* where form and emptiness are seen as interconnected. The contemporary Vietnamese Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, wrote a book on this sutra called *The Heart of Understanding*. It is one of the most insightful commentaries on this text. He begins by saying that when you see this page you will see a cloud and he goes on to illustrate what he calls the interbeing of paper, cloud, rain, and tree. This same interrelationship is evident in the Flower Garland (Avatamsaka) Sutra of Hua Yen Buddhism. Also in the Treatise on the Golden Lion delivered by Fa-tsang to the Empress Wu the Hua Yen teaching regarding the dependent origination of all reality is fully displayed. The goal

of both of these texts is to achieve the full awareness of interdependence that is a form of enlightenment.

Nature and Changes in Nature

A second way in which we can appreciate the ecological implications of the East Asian classics is by examining the views of nature and the changes in nature that they embody. Although distinct by traditions and text, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the East Asian traditions share organic and holistic views of nature. While nuances are needed, we can suggest that this differs from Western views of nature, especially since the Enlightenment period where nature became more objectified.

In the Confucian tradition nature is seen as moral and dynamic. Nature is considered to be dynamic and constantly transforming (*sheng, sheng*). It is also seen as positive, life generating, and fecund. Harmonizing with the changes in nature is viewed as a goal for humans as individuals and as a society. In the *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)* achieving sincerity is part of realizing the intimate bonding that exists between one's self, nature, and the cosmos. Tu Weiming translates the title as "Centrality and Commonality" where centrality is the ground of existence and commonality or harmony is the unfolding process of self-expression amidst the dynamic forces of the universe.⁴

In the Daoist tradition nature is viewed as neutral and flowing. In the *Zhuangzi* the goal of spiritual practice is transcending change so as to embody the spontaneities of the Dao. In this one acknowledges the paradoxical nature of reality through humor and story. In the chapter titled "Discussion on Making All Things Equal" this sense

³ Ibid. p. 85.

⁴ Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (New York: State University of New York, 1989).

of indifference to change in nature is what is to be prized.⁵

Wang Ni replied, 'The Perfect Man is godlike. Though the great swamps blaze, they cannot burn him; though the great rivers freeze, they cannot chill him; though swift lightning splits the hills and howling gales shake the sea, they cannot frighten him. A man like this rides the clouds and mist, straddles the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him, much less the rules of profit and loss.'

With all the changes in nature one remains aloof and detached.

In Buddhism nature is considered to be atomistic and interdependent, as expressed in the together-rising-up of things (*pratityasamutpada*). This doctrine of the dependent origination of reality can lead to either sorrow or liberation. To avoid sorrow withdrawing from attachment to change in meditation is the object of practice. In the *Madhyamika* tradition the coincidence of opposites is affirmed such that nirvana and samsara are seen as one. This teaching moves directly into Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. The result is the life affirming aspects of nature in East Asian Buddhism such as we see in the Zen gardens and in the arts of flower arrangement and tea ceremony. A text that exemplifies the dynamic aspects of nature as revealing the Buddha nature in all sentient beings is Dogen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*. In the spirit of interdependence he writes:⁶

I came to realize clearly, that mind is
no other than mountains and rivers
and the great earth.

Self-Cultivation and the Role of the Human

In the Confucian tradition one can describe the process of self-cultivation as botanical cultivation of the person. This is aimed not simply for one's own gratification but also for engagement in the larger society or government service. Seeds and plants are the key metaphor reflecting the generation, growth, reproduction, and death in nature itself. In *Mencius* this is seen in cultivating the seeds of virtue (the four beginnings) so that they will lead to the four virtues of humaneness, rightness, decorum, and wisdom. It is also evident in *Mencius* in the story of Ox Mountain where deforestation occurred and the sprouts of trees were pulled up. The story ends with the analogy to humans:⁷

..... given nourishment, there is nothing
that will not grow; lacking nourishment,
there is nothing that will not be
destroyed. (6A:6)

This demonstrates the need for careful attention to the way of cultivating virtue.⁸

The Neo-Confucian tradition expands the correlative cosmology of the Han Confucian tradition by suggesting that personal virtues such as humaneness (*jen*) are comparable to cosmic principles such as origination (*yuan*). Thus there is a correlation between encouraging the development of humaneness in the person that

5 Burton Watson (trans.), *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 41.

6 Quoted by Ruben Habito, "Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth: Zen and Ecology," in Mary E. Tucker and Duncan Williams (eds.) *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deed* (Cambridge: Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997), p. 168. In Dogen Zenji, *Sokushin Ze-Butsu in Shobogenzo* (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1939), p. 98.

7 William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 151.

8 Sarah Allan's book, *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1997), illustrates this botanical cultivation well. Donald J. Monroe also uses the natural images of plants and water in his article, "The Family Network, the Stream of Water, and the Plant: Picturing Persons in Sung Neo-Confucianism," in Donald J. Munro (ed.) *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (University of Michigan, 1985).

parallels the larger fecundity of nature. Humaneness is thus compared to a seed that grows. Zhu Xi describes it this way:⁹

It is like the ten thousand things being stored and preserved. There is not a moment of cessation in such an operation, for in all of these things there is the spirit of life. Take, for example, such things as seeds of grain or the pits of peach and apricot. When sown they will grow. They are not dead things. For this reason they are called *ren* [the word *ren* means both 'pit' and 'humaneness']. This shows that *ren* implies the spirit of life.

In Daoism the cultivation of the body is highly prized. Personal healing and health are valued and to this end Chinese medicine developed methods of encouraging the flow of the vital force (*qi*). Thus, the arts of *qigong*, *taiqi*, and acupuncture all assisted this process of maintaining health. In this Daoist worldview the inner and outer landscapes are seen as part of the micro-macrocosm relationship of humans with nature and the cosmos. One of the most important Daoist expressions of this was the fourth century movement known as Highest Clarity (*Shangqing*). This involved the practice of visualization so as to see one's body as an intricate network of biocosmic energy. As James Miller describes this practice:¹⁰

Shangqing Daoism developed a sophisticated, esoteric array of spiritual technologies the purpose of which was to realize the transformation of the adept into a perfected, spiritual being. This

objective was achieved not by transcending or denying the world but rather by pursuing ever more deeply the latent cosmic connectivity that is implicit in having life at all. By learning to perceive the correlation of physiology, cosmology, and spiritual power, adepts were concretely able to actualize the transformation of themselves in their cosmic context.

James Miller is translating some of the key texts of this tradition that will add to the body of Asian ecological classics.

In Mahayana Buddhism meditative cultivation is designed for one to discover the Buddha nature in oneself and in the natural world at large. This is expressed in the eighth century Ch'an text, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Here meditation and wisdom are foundational where meditation is seen as the substance of wisdom, like a lamp; and wisdom is seen as the function of meditation, like the light. The goal of meditation, the samadhi of oneness, means the mind does not abide in things and yet all things reflect the Buddha nature. The mind has the potential to awaken to its full nature through meditation. Rich botanical imagery is used to express this:¹¹

The mind-ground contains the seed of living things, When the rain of the Dharma falls the flowers are brought forth.

When yourself you have awakened to the living seeds of the flower

The fruits of enlightenment matures of itself.

9 William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 712.

10 Norman J. Girardot, James Miller and Liu Xiaogan, *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 352.

11 Philip B. Yampolsky (trans.), *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 178.

Conclusion

These classical Chinese texts are now part of the vital and emerging dialogue among civilizations. We need to bring these humanistic texts to bear in facing the most pressing crisis humans have ever had to face, namely, the global environmental crisis with its complex local manifestations. We can learn to draw on the wisdom of the world's traditions for the flourishing of the Earth community at large. In this regard, present and future generations are relying on us to rediscover sustaining and sustainable human-Earth relations. The Chinese classics are indispensable in this process. Indeed, they may expand the boundaries of what are considered to be ecological classics and may broaden our horizons in both the West and in China. This is a primary foundation for a dialogue among civilizations that is so urgently needed for the environmental crisis to be addressed adequately.

