

Chang, Chia-ju, ed. *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*. Palgrave MacMillan. 2019. ISBN-13: 978-3030186333. 373 pp.

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Chinese Environmental Humanities is a collaborative humanities project that showcases current research in the field of Chinese environmental humanities (later referred to as CEH in this review) published in 2019. It is a collection of fourteen chapters that bring together sixteen scholars from diverse disciplines, who explore the relationship between environment and humanities. By examining the two core concepts *huanjing* and *ziran* that shape the field of CEH, Chang argues that the practice of “environing at the margins” embedded in traditional Chinese culture can bring a refreshing perspective to Environmental Studies.

Taking landscape painting as a point of departure, Chang argues that in traditional Chinese culture lies an ecological view that can help envision a better future but has been overshadowed by the Western idea of modernity. For example, “the fusion of heaven and humanity” that has been the basis of “ecological civilization” is not a new or imported concept but has long been embedded in Chinese culture, such as in the form of landscape paintings (Chang 1). Thus, China plays a significant and unique role in the EH field, resulting in the significance of CEH. However, naming the field CEH raises questions about “Chineseness” — namely, are these specifically Chinese approaches to China undertaken by Chinese people? Do cases where “Chinese” become the local example of a universalizing or westernizing theory also belong to CEH? Chang answers these questions by arguing that these different cases can be read as “strong or weak forms of CEH,” making CEH the field itself as a spectrum that can include more related cases (7). Chang then introduces the institutionalization of the field. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, EH conferences, workshops, and curricula have appeared in universities in mainland China, Hong Kong, as well as overseas.

By examining the premodern Chinese context, Chang teases out the definition

of “*huanjing*” and “*ziran*,” arguing that the two concepts can bring alternative approaches to EH today, which can be considered one of the book’s greatest contributions. She argues that *huanjing*, although in modern times, becomes interchangeable with “environment” in English; in the traditional context, it can be seen as a “practice.” *Huan* literally means “encircle” or “environ,” while *jing* means “territory” or “borders.” Back in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), *huanjing* carried the meaning of the establishment of an imperial or ethnic boundary and defending or expanding one’s own territory by securing the border (12). From such an historico-linguistic perspective, *huanjing* can be read as related to “colony,” signifying the practices such as the privatization of commons, public spaces, or lands that originally belonged to other human communities (13). Chang then uses the “U.S.-Mexico” anti-immigrant wall as an example of *huanjing* as a “practice of environing at margins,” which demonstrates the ability of *huanjing* to open up our critics and reflections on transcultural and contemporary issues. In a nutshell, the re-examination of *huanjing* as a practice calls our attention to the process of **inclusion and exclusion** during the “environing” and invites examination of the “multiple forms of exclusive socio-environmental practices at the margins,” where marginality includes not only identity and communities but also marginalized knowledge (13).

While the unique Chinese word *huanjing* evokes the re-examination of practices, *ziran* in the Chinese context provides an alternative, non-anthropocentric approach to sustainability. Instead of the anthropocentric idea of “saving nature,” namely treating nature as something rarefied that can be preserved and passed on to the next generation, Chang argues that the Daoist concept of *ziran* brings the idea of enabling nature to recuperate, thrive, and flourish. It provides a shifting view of nature from object to subject and asserts the agency of nature to self-generate.

In such a theoretical framework, the fourteen chapters engage in “environing at margins” and are divided into three sections — namely “Chinese ecocriticism and eco-translation studies,” “Chinese eco cinema and ecomedia studies,” and “Sustainability, organic community, and Buddhist multispecies ethics.” The time period ranges from premodern to modern, and the subjects include literature, film adaptation, documentation, translation, and advent-grade art, as well as indigenous studies and multispecies studies. For example, in the first section, Chapter 3 takes Yu Yue, Zhang Binling, and Liang Shumin as examples, criticizing Western modernity for its developmental mode of industrial-scale extractivism and mass consumption, and reconfirms the premodern Chinese values that are beneficial to the environment. Chapter 4 focuses on the literary works of healing written by ethnic minority women, illustrating how the center is redefined from the margins’ perspective. In

the CEH theoretical framework, center and margin are no longer stable concepts — the herbs that can heal, although they “grow in undisturbed corners, are never marginalized” and can challenge the interspecies relationship (90). Chapters 5 and 6 take translation and adaptation as a critical lens, with Chapter 5 focusing on the French cinematic adaptation of Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng*) and its ecological implications, which shifts the focus from nationalism in the original story to the environmental issues in the film. Chapter 6 addresses the issue of the mass extinction of bionym (“names of plant and animal”) in modern literature in translation practices.

The second section shifts to focus on different forms of media. Chapters 7 to 10 walk us through Xu Bing’s *Silkworm Series*, Wang Junliang’s *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, the *bianxian* practice at Nu River, and the “Yellow Eco-Peril” discourse. The third section examines the question of China’s sustainability, organic farming in urban centers, and Buddhist animal ethics, as well as the monastic praxis of human-vegetal multispecies holism. Overall, the pieces challenge the binary definition of center and margin, as well as an anthropocentric view of the environment. This also echoes the position of the field itself in reality, as stated in the “Afterword” by Slovic: while CEH is itself still in a marginalized position, it certainly plays a central role in the development of China as well as the world.

Chapter 2 is a detailed example to illustrate how traditional Chinese culture can help provide new perspectives to the EH. Chang focuses on Lu Shuyuan and his Tao Yuanming studies, arguing that the politically marginalized “peasant-poet” can provide a critical frame to examine the “moonlight poetry” written by peasant workers, thus conceptualizing the “discourse of environing at the margins” that speaks for/with China’s largest marginalized group — rural migrant workers — a vis-à-vis current systematic erasure of the pastoral mode of life (38). By tracing the early history of ecocriticism in China, pointing out the freedom brought by the Open Door Policy, and Lu’s identity as a postcolonial scholar, Chang demonstrates how these factors provide a ground for Lu Shuyuan’s eco-analysis and his effort to “humanize the ecological system and to ecologize humanity” (46).

Chang then dives into Lu’s argument that the environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis, thus, a humanist issue (44). In this case, literature and art should serve to mend the broken spiritual sphere, and this is where poetry steps in. By comparing Tao’s poems and the peasant workers’ works, one can detect a similarity between the yearning for an agrarian culture and mourning for the loss of rural areas facing industrialization. In addition to spiritual meaning, Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Blossom” poetry also provides a practical possibility in architecture and the

work-life sphere to achieve harmony between human beings and the environment. Tradition and cultural roots are specters providing analysis and possible solutions to contemporary crises.

Comments, Questions, and Critiques

It is certainly a valuable effort to incorporate traditional Chinese culture into the EH studies in the still Eurocentric academia. This collection can be seen as an effort to make invisible issues in developing countries visible, to show how marginalized knowledge (traditional Chinese culture, Daoist and Buddhist, and indigenous knowledge) can contribute to the study of ecology and bring an epistemological shift in treating the environment and nature. The division of chapters also provides a window to look at the various subject matters and methodologies in the CEH field. Overall, this collection is informative, well-researched, and contains many insights.

Still, some questions might be raised in order to better reflect on the CEH field. For example, one might be curious about whether methodologies in the CEH field are fundamentally different from other disciplines in EH, which circles back to the question of “Chineseness.” Furthermore, how do we deal with the emerging new humanities field, such as environmental humanities or medical humanities, in the trending of interdisciplinary studies? How are the aims and methodologies of these fields different from the traditional ones? *Chinese Environmental Humanities* can be seen as a starting point to deal with these questions.

When it comes to the practice of incorporating Chinese culture into ecological studies, such as in the case in Chapter 2, one might ask, why does the author specifically refer to Tao Yuanming as a comparison to tease out the “yearning for home” motif in peasant workers’ poems? While Tao signifies a politically marginalized poet escaping to nature for spiritual support and a traditional agrarian way of life, why not incorporate other poets who write about rural areas? In addition to Tao’s poems, in Chapter 3, it is Buddhism that becomes the core concept serving as an Asia-centric alternative to the Euro-American modernity in Zhang Bingling’s argument (65). Instead of seeking a particular answer, the broader concern behind these two questions is that, traditional Chinese culture is not a monolithic idea but ranges over a time period of thousands of years; thus, in a specific context, generalized appropriation should be avoided. Furthermore, while Chang argues that Tao Yuanming’s poems can provide an inspiration for a more ecological way of living, such as providing new possibilities in architecture and a lifestyle that is slow paced and allows idleness, such lifestyle is normally enjoyed by the class of people other than peasant workers. How do we deal with current class differences in the discussion of

a utopian ecological view?

Finally, with the field developing so fast and emphasizing its relationship with politics and policies, one might be curious about what the EH curriculum envisions its students to do in daily practice. In other words, in practice, how does CEH deal with the gap between “the fusion of heaven and humanity” cosmology and the ruptures and chaos in reality? While we use landscape painting as a positive example of an ecological view, is there a danger that such painting only bears a nostalgic and utopian sentimentality? Furthermore, in the Western reception of such CEH, would the inclusion of Daoist or Buddhist spiritual thoughts induce a problem of “self-Orientalism?” Orientalism, raised by Said, points out a power structure where the Orient is treated as the exotic other to define the “modern, advanced” West. By arguing against Western modernity, is there a danger of reconfirmation of such a power relationship? These are common questions when emphasizing the “Chinese elements” in the humanities field and when coping with the gap between theory and reality. Overall, *Chinese environmental Humanities* is undoubtedly a valuable effort to bring Chinese voices into the environmental humanities field, while how we view the new humanities and how China positions itself in the field remains to be explored.

Works Cited:

Chang, Chia-ju, ed. *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.

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