

## Introduction – Reflections on Nature in Asian Thought

Andrea Loseries-Leick, Austria/Österreich

Nature and environment are a challenge also for the historical sciences when we ask how nature was reflected in the past. Does every culture live in its own perception of nature? Is nature a kind of map of the outer world people made up more or less rather as evidence of the respective culture than of the outer world? Do we find in the ancient scriptures of various cultures time- and cultural crossing experiences?

The dichotomy between urban life (order) and the open country life (chaos) was rooted in Sumerian culture and took hold in all other urban civilizations of the Ancient Near East, as well as Egypt, Greece and Rome. In ancient Greece civilization expanded within the shadows of the city walls. In fact, walls have defended the cradles of all modern civilisations. This material protection of the utilitarian urban system left a profound imprint in people's minds. It introduced into our cultural conceptions the principle of 'divide in order to rule' which granted security by building walls and by separating the city from the hostile world outside. We separate each country from others; we subdivide our knowledge in defined compartments, we distinguish between man and nature.

This basic and pervasive dualism has survived the West's shifts from the idealism of Greece of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. to the hedonistic materialism of Rome and to the spiritual, ideational period of Medieval Europe. This dualism is manifested in the separation between facts and norms – the opposition between nature and convention – that is a continuous thread in Western philosophy. It is manifested in the Christian dualism between God and a dependent nature that could not help us in our spiritual advancement but only provide temptations to test our faith and religious strength. It is manifested in the mind-matter dualism of Plato (the forms recognized by reason versus the world of experience), the Cartesian separation between mind and matter, Locke's representative perception, and Kant's *noumena* and *phenomena*. It is manifested in the opposing monistic doctrines that treat mind and matter as intrinsically all mind (Hegel, Berkeley, Leibniz) or matter (Lucretius, Hobbes, Marx). This separation between us and nature is most evident in the growth of modern science out of Renaissance humanism which glorified our ability to explore and control nature.<sup>1</sup>

How did the cultures outside of Europe reflect upon man and nature? This is the question to which the various ethnic representatives will comment on in their contributions to this volume. My survey on nature and environment in the history of Asian wisdom introduces the philosophically controversial positions as a construction of the respective culture.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. J. RUMMEL, *The Dynamic Psychological Field*, 1975, chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup> see SIEFERLE, Rolf Peter: *Naturerfahrung und Naturkonstruktion*. In: Sieferle, R.P. & H. Breuninger (Hg.): *Natur-Bilder. Wahrnehmungen von Natur und Umwelt in der Geschichte*. Frankfurt 1999:9-18.

Asian thought generally understands nature as the outward manifestation of interior processes which are interpreted in different ways. This implies that the experience of nature has no objective basis and hence no patterns of evaluating conceptions of nature as better or worse, advanced or primitive. This intrinsic inseparability of the outer and inner world is etymologically evident in the ancient Indian word *bhava*, which means both 'being' and 'nature'.

In ancient India, the fundamental unity of creation was not just philosophical speculation; the goal of life itself was to harmonize feeling and action. By encouraging meditation, concentration and moderation, India cultivated a state of consciousness which took on a spiritual dimension. For 'Mother' India earth, water, light, fruits and flowers, were not mere physical phenomena to be utilized and then discarded but a necessity for the attainment of perfection. Such ideas were based on an intuitive search for unity and integration. Nature was not to be dominated, explored, or exploited but to be unveiled in order to display the underlying reality of Self. For India it was the soul (*atma*) that required development. In the Upanishads a person who has attained the highest consciousness, who has become 'one with god' is called 'peaceful', and 'in perfect harmony with nature'. He is *rishi*, a man of wisdom, a seer.<sup>3</sup>

The question whether natural phenomena such as plants or stones were sentient beings and in a certain sense conscious (*cetana*), was as such not relevant for the Vedic Indian. He lived in an 'animistic time' with a still vague borderline between animate and inanimate which even endowed man-made tools with some sort of consciousness. This must have resulted in a highly developed fear and for us hardly imaginable dread of hurting or harming anything alive.<sup>4</sup> In early Vedic times trees were thought to be permanent or temporary seats of various spirits. Prayers and invocations to plants, also symbolic wound treatments for cut down tree trunks prove that plants were indeed considered to be living beings exposed to suffering. Burials could take place at the root of trees to allow the dead to 'slip into' the roots of the plant.<sup>5</sup> Such concepts were passed on later in the Upanishads as the doctrine of rebirth, encompassing several stations of transformation of the dead into elements such as water, returning into plants and seeds in the form of rain.

In the Jaina doctrine of Jina Mahavira, a contemporary of Buddha, the animism of the Vedic period was even more pronounced: not only animals and plants were living beings, but the elements too were considered animate. They were included in the ethical concept of non-violence (*ahimsa*). Accordingly, a Jaina monk was not allowed to cook or to splash with water, even to fan air was forbidden and he could only feed on food which was killed by others — and not for his sake. In ancient Jainism — as well as in ancient Buddhism — it was immaterial whether the food was vegetarian or meat based.

---

<sup>3</sup> see TAGORE, Rabindranath: *Sadhana*. Paris 1971:12ff.

<sup>4</sup> see GLASENAPP, Helmuth v.: *Die Philosophie der Inder*. 4. Aufl. Stuttgart 1985:385 und WEZLER, Albrecht: *Samika and Srigin. Zum Verständnis einer askesekritischen Erzählung aus dem Mahabharata*. In: *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 23. 1979:44.

<sup>5</sup> see translation of Walter SLAJE, in: *Bewusstsein und Wahrnehmungsvermögen von Pflanzen aus hinduistischer Sicht*. In: Scholz, Bernhard (Hg.): *Der orientalische Mensch und seine Beziehung zur Umwelt*. Grazer Morgenländische Studien. Graz 1989:149.

In Buddhism however, plants and elements were not considered to be sentient beings because they lack vitality, warmth and consciousness although plants were included in their ethics of non-violence as they were considered the living space of animals and the residence of gods.<sup>6</sup>

Born in India, Buddhism has embraced several general Indian concepts such as the Law of Cause and Effect (*karma*) the related ethic of non-violence (*ahimsa*), as well as the doctrine of transmigration in a constant cycle of existences (*samsara*) and the idea of the fundamental need of salvation or liberation for all sentient beings. It is the aim of each and every being to escape the cycle of rebirth. Mahayana-Buddhism which developed in Northern India around the time of the birth of Christ, considers the world not full of suffering and impermanent, but as a mere illusion. This applies also for nature. This view obviates environmental protection, but also its opposite; it cannot be a concern for Buddhism to bring the 'earth under control'. This does not imply a neglect of interest in nature. Although the world of appearance is not of Absolute Reality, one is still confronted with reality in everyday life and nature therefore is of consequence for the Buddhist path of liberation.<sup>7</sup> While there is no romantic adoration of nature, there is a certain advantage to meditate in lonely and secluded natural surroundings. Generally a Buddhist monk should renounce his craving and attachment for worldly things. Modesty is one of the most essential virtues for a Buddhist. Therefore, unlimited strive for profit and gain which directly or indirectly is one of the main causes for the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment, contradicts the fundamental principles of Buddhism.<sup>8</sup>

In Tibet (since the 7<sup>th</sup> century) and in Mongolia (since the 13<sup>th</sup> century) the introduction of Buddhism proved to be sustainable, but it assimilated many features of indigenous beliefs. The practice of placing the skulls of cattle on heaps of stones (tib. *Lha tho*, mong. *Obo*) which are considered the homes of the local protecting deities on passes, hill tops, on edges of fields and along rivers, is a survival of the belief in the animal's resurrection from its bones, widespread among some hunting tribes of Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> Certain ambivalence in feeling is characteristic for the Buddhist influenced folk religion of Tibet and Mongolia. There is on the one hand the compassionate peasant or nomad who rescues the smallest insect from danger, blowing on it and speaking Mantras to bring this being closer to the salvation of *Nirvana*, on the other the very same person anxiously implores the hostile forces of nature with magical rites. The challenge of an uncertain environment (tib. *gyu 'khor*,) — apparently inhabited by malicious beings — has produced among the theologically naive peasant a way of conduct which combines the practice of non-violence as a positive deed with various magic rites, including Buddhist Tantric

<sup>6</sup> see in detail SLAJE 1989:149-169.

<sup>7</sup> see in detail Helmut TAUSCHER: Buddhismus und umweltbezogene Ethik. In: Scholz 1989:186-200.

<sup>8</sup> see LOSERIES, Andrea et al.: Buddhismus für eine gerechte und nachhaltige Wirtschaftsordnung. Beitrag zur 2. Europäischen ökumenischen Versammlung Graz 1997, published in: Ursache und Wirkung. Zeitschrift für Buddhismus. 7. Jahrgang. Nr. 23, Wien 1997/98:12ff.

<sup>9</sup> see FRIEDRICH, A.: Knochen und Skelett in der Vorstellungswelt Nordasiens. Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik. Bd. 5. Wien 1943:189-247.

ones, in order to bring the hostile forces of nature under control. The altruistic disposition of the Mahayana doctrine however, remains unaltered.<sup>10</sup>

Chinese philosophy pursued, characteristically, a middle path. Neither nature nor soul was predominant. Instead, humanity and nature must harmonize. As nature was seen to be orderly and regular, so should the relationships between human beings. Nature's order is manifest in everyday experience and can be perceived rationally and emotionally. There is no bifurcation between subjective and objective, nor between abstract philosophy and the practice of living. Chinese concepts are concrete rather than abstract, and philosophy is a way of life. A historical keynote of Chinese culture has been harmony between humankind and nature, and this has been the essence of both Taoism and Confucianism, the two most influential Chinese philosophical systems.

In Chinese we find different terms for nature reflecting the various conceptions in their respective contexts: nature as cosmos (*ziran*), as base of the universe (*dao*), nature as wilderness (*ye*), nature as agricultural landscape (*tian*) and others.<sup>11</sup>

In the sixth century Taoist philosophy identified with Laozi (Lao Tsu) human beings are a small part of a single, vast and barely comprehensible natural unity: against the numerous things that exist, man is not more than the tip of a hair underneath the stomach of a horse.<sup>12</sup>

The word *ziran*<sup>13</sup> 'being on its own'<sup>14</sup>, now a modern term for 'nature', had till the first centuries A.C. a cosmic dimension. It is characteristic for *dao* as the base, the law of the universe. In the term *tiandi* 'sky and earth' we find the polarity of the cosmos as *yang* and *yin*, brightness and darkness etc., while *tian* 'sky' alone signifies the divine, the numinous, which communicates impulses and feelings, thus entering the human sphere: The sky does not speak; only by behavior and action it manifests his will.<sup>15</sup>

In Confucianism we find the opposite. It is less concerned with the role of human beings in the natural order and more interested in defining rules of conduct for the interaction between human beings. The sufferings of the people could be relieved by applying the wealth of nature to human purposes.

To quote the philosopher Xunzi (300-237 B.C.): You glorify nature and meditated on her. Why not domesticate and regulate her? You obey nature and sing her praise. Why not control cause and use it? You depend on things and marvel at them. Why not unfold your own ability and transform them?<sup>16</sup>

K'ung-tzu (551-479 B.C.) was the first philosopher to deliver the world from the influence of heaven (*tian*), an idea which attained its peak during the Ming-Dynasty (1368-1644).

---

<sup>10</sup> see LOSERIES, Andrea: Das Erleuchtungsdenken am Dach der Welt, in Scholz 1989:171-183.

<sup>11</sup> see in detail LINCK, Gudula: Naturverständnis im vormodernen China. In: Sieferle, Peter (ed.): Naturbilder. Wahrnehmungen von Natur und Umwelt in der Geschichte. Frankfurt/New York 1999:73ff.

<sup>12</sup> Chuang Chou, quoted in Li due Jen: The Civilisations of China. 1975:48.

<sup>13</sup> Tao Te king, verse 23.

<sup>14</sup> opposed to 'man-made', see LINCK 1999:74

<sup>15</sup> Mengzi, Buch V Wanzhang, 1.5.

<sup>16</sup> quoted in MORRIS-SUZUKI, Tessa: Re-inventing Japan. Time, Space, Nation. New York 1988:39

In Neo-Confucianism (Song-Dynasty) the philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200) speaks of *qi*, 'matter', 'spirit' (universe) and *li*, 'organizing principle' underlying *qi*, an idea very close to Tao. Among the phenomena of the world the human being is holding a special position: Water and earth have *qi*, but not life (*sheng*). Grass and trees have life, but no capacity of differentiation (*zhi*), the feathered beings and those on four feet have the capacity of differentiation, but no sense of duty (*yi*); the human being has *qi*, life, capacity of differentiation and sense of duty; therefore he is the most precious under the sky.<sup>17</sup>

While in the centuries before and after the birth of Christ all main terms for nature (*dao*, *qi*, *tian*, *ziran*) assume a numinous divinity, in later times philosophers like Liu Zongyuan (773-819), Shen Gua (1031-1095) or Chen Liang (1143-1194) saw nature to be self-reproductive without divine influence. In the later imperial times the interaction of nature and humans was discussed.<sup>18</sup> At the same time the philosophers warned explicitly against the misuse of nature by the humans.



*In Japan we find a deep connectedness between 'culture' and 'nature'. Imperial Gardens, Kyoto — In Japan finden wir eine tiefe Verbundenheit von Kultur mit Natur. Kaiserliche Gärten, Kyoto.*<sup>19</sup>

While China had a long tradition of intervention in and control over nature, a tradition which resulted in the drastic deforestation of large parts of the Chinese country side,<sup>20</sup> Japan lacked the concept of 'humans as subjects and nature as object'. There we find a deep connectedness between 'culture' and 'nature' in

<sup>17</sup> Xunzi jijie 1988. Kap. 9, Wangzhi, Beijing (reprint) 164; see translation Linck 1999:77 and note 9.

<sup>18</sup> Lü Kun, 1536-1618; Song Yingxing, 1587-1661, Wang Fuzhi, 1619-1662.

<sup>19</sup> Photo: Loseries-Leick

<sup>20</sup> see ELVIN, Marc: Three thousand years of unsustainable Development: China's Environment from Archaic times to the present. East Asian History, no. 6 (December) 1993:7-46.

Japanese thought. Nature was seen not as the creation of a transcendent god, but as a constantly changing, constantly 'becoming' reality in which human beings were deeply embedded. This reality was depicted in binary opposites as realms of 'order' and 'chaos' or of 'purity' and 'pollution'. In Japan, such dualities were understood not in terms of conflict but in terms of fluctuating poles, they were 'flexible, complementary categories' whose boundaries might shift as circumstances altered.<sup>21</sup> The feeling for nature expressed in the Japanese arts have little to do with a practical interest in preserving the natural environment and much more to do with a particular use of nature as a source of metaphors for spiritual and philosophical values. Natural features such as a cherry blossom or pine trees are appreciated because they represent the fleeting nature of life or the victory of life over death. In this use of nature as a symbol it matters little whether the cherry blossoms or pine trees flourish abundantly in the wild or are seen in the tame and confined surroundings of an urban backyard.<sup>22</sup>

The Taoist view of nature exerted a powerful influence on Chan (Zen), and their ideas were absorbed by Japanese Buddhism because they harmonized with the respect for nature, implicit in the age-old Japanese animistic traditions.<sup>23</sup>

In Japanese 'nature' is *shizen*, 'physical environment'. According to Ando Shoeki (1703-1761) *shizen* is 'the self-existent', 'the ground of all beings', which illustrates the absolute absence of division between humans and nature.

The notion of *kaibutsu* as it involved in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan, implied that the most perfect nature was a nature thoroughly improved by human hands.

Kaibara Ekiken (1630-1714) was the first rural philosopher and botanist on *Kaibutsu* 'making use', 'revealing the nature of things'.<sup>24</sup> It is the nature behind this search for a universal principle of nature which would provides the basis for human morality. The deepening awareness of and reference for nature makes us better people while a richer understanding of the workings of nature offers practical ideas for improving agricultural productivity and standards of living.<sup>25</sup>

The utilitarian approach developed in the writings of Miyazaki Yasusada (1623-1697) who wrote the most influential Tokugawa treatise on agricultural technique.<sup>26</sup> In this vision nature is not a hostile force but is instead abundant and benign. It is not disparaging nature,<sup>27</sup> but considers 'art' and 'technology' as the means by which the perfection of nature is revealed. It is precisely man's ability to apply 'art' to 'nature' which gives him a special place in the natural order.

---

<sup>21</sup> EISENSTADT, N.S.: The Japanese Attitude to Nature. A Framework of basic Ontological Conceptions. In: Kalland, A./Ed., Asian Perceptions of Nature. A critical approach. London 1994:198-214.

<sup>22</sup> KALLAND, Arne: Culture in Japanese Nature. In: Asian Perceptions of Nature. A critical Approach, edited by O. Bruun and A. Kalland, London 1994:243-257

<sup>23</sup> LA FLEUR, William R.: Saiggo and the Buddhist view of nature. In: Nature in Asian Traditions and Thought. Essays on Environmental Philosophy, Ed. J. Baird, Callicot & Roger T. Amer, Albany, 1989:195-196

<sup>24</sup> SAIGUSA 1973:371-374 in Tokugawa's Writings (1603-1867), see bibliography in La Fleur 1989

<sup>25</sup> SAIGUSA 1973:373, see bibliography in La Fleur 1989

<sup>26</sup> WAJITA 1987:43-47, quote page 41, see bibliography in La Fleur 1989

<sup>27</sup> CLAYRE 1977:307, see bibliography in La Fleur 1989

Human beings have inherited the spirit of heaven — a spirit which cares for and nurtures all creatures under heaven.<sup>28</sup>

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) sees nature as a creative force associated with the gods of the Shinto pantheon. Japan's legacy of Shinto beliefs, with their concept of man as an integral part of nature suggests, that this 'latent essence of Japanese culture' survived intact, until modern times, although often submerged beneath overlays of cultural borrowing.<sup>29</sup> Visions of nature are central to modern constructions of national identity. In defining themselves as citizens, individuals are encouraged to envisage a national landscape which extends far beyond the familiar scenery of daily life.<sup>30</sup> In Japan images of nature have played a central role in making the imagery of nationhood. Ishida Erichiro defined the essence of Japanese culture in terms of a unique national feeling for nature, a broadly based, characteristic 'natural sense' (*shizensei*) stretching back to the pre-agricultural era.<sup>31</sup> This concept found resonance in a surprisingly large number of writings.

If one studies and understood the laws of nature, one could create the proper foundations for a combination of Japanese and Western knowledge. The basis of continuation is recognition of the way in which human activity (whether political or technological) fulfills the workings of nature. Once we understand the laws of nature we can use the 'human way' to develop resources and enterprises. Tokugawa (Meiji-Society) developed a system of forest protection, admired modern environmentalists. In the Meiji period industrialization was pursued with hardly a thought for its environmental consequence.

But because human beings and their environment were not separate but were of a 'single tree of life', there was no particular value in an independent nature, untouched by human hands. The notion of *kaibutsu* as it involved in late Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan, implied that the most perfect nature was nature much thoroughly improved by human hands.

It was the integration of humans and nature which provided an intellectual basis for the Meiji government's supreme indifference to the destruction of nature by the process of industrialization. Industry itself is an instrument for achieving the moral principles on nature, as one Meiji thinker put it.<sup>32</sup>

In contradiction, Tanaka Shozo (1841-1913), a leading figure of protests, declared: humans should be the slaves of living things, their servants and messengers. They should become the reflection of nature and live at peace and any grow close to the spirit.<sup>33</sup>

Japan is special. It has a distinctive sensitivity to nature (Japanese garden, brush painting). Rather than expressing resignation to nature or improving an artificial symmetry on culture, Japanese arts involve an empathetic coming together of the human spirit and nature.

<sup>28</sup> MIYAZUKI 1972:84, see bibliography in La Fleur 1989

<sup>29</sup> OLSON, Edward: Man and Nature. East Asia and the West. Asian Profile 3, n.6 (december), 1975:645

<sup>30</sup> MORRIS-SUZUKI, Tessa: Re-inventing Japan. Time. Space. Nation. New York 1988:35ff.

<sup>31</sup> ISHIDA 1972:24, quoted in Morris-Suzuki 1988

<sup>32</sup> MORRIS-SUZUKI 1988:54

<sup>33</sup> 1954, quoted in MORRIS-SUZUKI 1988:35

In conclusion, we may say that Western philosophy described and controlled nature; Indian philosophy emphasized the inner soul underlying nature, China harmony with nature, and Japan an artistically rooted sensitivity in viewing nature. Clearly, nature as a concept means different things among these cultures and historically has varied in meaning within the same culture. Nature in classical (Greek) Western thought was organismic, suffused with life and having intelligence (as were the Gods of Olympus). To the seventeenth and eighteenth century Western rationalist, nature was a machine. And now it is a probabilistic distribution of energy with a tendency toward entropy. In Asian reflections on nature we find an integral approach, a great spiritual affinity between nature and being, between sense perception and the laws or principles comprising that experience.

In our highly developed, scientifically oriented civilisation, it is rather difficult to find the path of wisdom nature offers. Therefore, an insight into the historically grown reflections on nature of other cultures might enlarge our horizon for a new, integrative approach to nature and our environment.



*Western philosophy described and controlled nature. French Baroque Garden, Schloss Augustusburg in Brühl, Germany. — Westliche Philosophien betonten die Beschreibung und das Kontrollieren der Natur. Französischer Barockgarten, Schloss Augustusburg in Brühl Deutschland.<sup>34</sup>*

---

<sup>34</sup> Photo: <<http://www.schlossbruehl.de/parkanlage/ansichten/index.htm>>



# ZOBODAT - [www.zobodat.at](http://www.zobodat.at)

Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

Zeitschrift/Journal: [Monografien Natur und Geisteswissenschaften](#)

Jahr/Year: 2004

Band/Volume: [MNG2](#)

Autor(en)/Author(s): Loseries-Leick Andrea

Artikel/Article: [Introduction - Reflections on Nature in Asian Thought.  
Einführung. 19-26](#)