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## For an Ecological History. Reflections inspired by China

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# The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan

## International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2019

30th edition

edited by  
Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini,  
Maurizio Paolillo

Fondazione Benetton  
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## **The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan**

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## Contents

6	The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens, 1990-2019	133	Livio Zanini, <i>Before the Arrival of Tea in Europe. The Chinese beverage in western sources prior to the 17th century</i>
8	Regulations and Scientific Committee		
9	<i>The Tea Gardens of Dazhangshan. Statement of the Carlo Scarpa Prize, in English, Chinese and Italian</i>	147	Giuseppe Barbera, <i>Anthropocene, Agriculture, and Landscape. Reflections on the margins of a journey in China</i>
23	Maurizio Paolillo, <i>From China to Wuyuan County. A historical and geographical overview</i>	169	Anna-Paola Pola, <i>"The Most Beautiful Village in China." Heritage, politics, and transformations in rural China</i>
41	Maurizio Paolillo, <i>The Beauty of the Dao. The multiple faces of landscape in the cultural tradition of China</i>	185	Mónica Luengo, <i>Cultural and Heritage Values of the Asian Tea Landscapes in an International Framework</i>
61	Hong Peng, <i>Poetry and Craftsmanship, a Marriage of Nature and History. The gardening philosophy of Dazhangshan's organic tea farms</i>	199	Hervé Brunon, Maxime Decaudin, <i>For an Ecological History. Reflections inspired by China</i>
105	Chen Xing, <i>A Home for Tea, a Home for Books</i>	215	Massimo Rossi, <i>Some Reflections on Cartographic Representation in the Chinese Culture</i>
107	Xiao Kunbing, <i>Culture, Cultivations and Tea Routes in Ancient China. Historical and anthropological aspects</i>	229	Bibliography
120	Yu Yue, <i>Environment, Tea, and Tea Culture in Jiangxi</i>	237	Illustration References
		238	List of Authors
		239	International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2019



1. Map of Robert Fortune's 1848 visit to the tea districts of China.

“People pursuing their official careers like aspiring eagles would stop chasing fame at the sight of these captivating ridges. By the same token, those busy planning everyday affairs found it hard to tear themselves away from this tranquil beauty.”<sup>1</sup> Wu Jun (469-520), *Letter to Song Yuansi*.

“And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin.”<sup>2</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Swann's Way* (1913).

HERVÉ BRUNON, MAXIME DECAUDIN  
**For an Ecological History.**  
**Reflections inspired by China**

**Impressions of Dazhangshan**

In 1848, a mission on behalf of the East India Company led the Scottish botanist Robert Fortune to visit “the plains of this district and the surrounding area of Moo-Yuen,”<sup>3</sup> well-known for supplying “most of the excellent commercial green tea”<sup>4</sup> (fig. 1). In his footsteps, and

intrigued by the cultivation of this ancient beverage, we walk along “the river [...] bounded by high hills on each side,” we cross “an extensive and beautiful valley [...] under tea cultivation, [where] the soil is rich and fertile.”<sup>5</sup> While ingenious rice paddies supplant natural streams, the dark pine branches covering the hills surrenders mid-way through in favour of the verdant and regular rows of tea (fig. 2, p. 200). These lavish bushes appear to joyfully follow the steady undulations of contour lines, thus depicting with their

1. YUAN 2018, vol. II, p. 214.

2. PROUST 1966, p. 58.

3. On a secret industrial espionage mission with the intent to replicate the tea production process in India, Fortune travels to ‘Sung-lo’ mountain located in today’s Anhui province. What he calls Moo-Yuen is in fact the county of Wuyuan 婺源.

4. FORTUNE 1852, p. 87.

5. FORTUNE 1852, p. 84.



2

2. Tea plants in Dazhangshan clinging to the topographical contours of the hills in the form of parallel hedges.

young shoots the terrain's topographic map. In contrast, "rocks in this part of the country are chiefly composed of Silurian slate, [...] a red calcareous sandstone [which] has the effect of giving a reddish tinge to the barren hills, as it crumbles to pieces"<sup>6</sup> (fig. 3).

#### **Dazhangshan, Wuyuan, and China's environmental future**

Like Robert Fortune, who visited southern China a hundred and seventy years ago, the Benetton Foundation's scientific committee realized that there was much to be learnt about local tea production. Inhabitants are proud of Dazhangshan's green tea quality and its commercial success (大鄣山). With reason, the Wuyuan Dazhangshan Organic Tea Farmers Association (*Wuyuan Dazhangshan youji chanong xiehui* 婺源大鄣山有机茶农协会) was the first in

China to join an international fairtrade organization. This certification not only allowed local products to access an international market, but it also guarantees, thanks to the redistribution of part of the profits to the association, improved living conditions for farmers. The county of Wuyuan (婺源县), for many centuries known as the golden triangle of tea in China, is no less exemplary. Committed to organic farming and environmentally aware since 1996, the region has obtained several certifications from local (OFDC-Organic Food Development Center) and international bodies, such as the American OCIA association (Organic Crop Improvement Association), the German BCS Öko-Garantie labels, and the French ECOCERT (Organisme de contrôle et de certification). Aimed at improving the

6. FORTUNE 1852, p. 87.



3

income of local producers, this practice has contributed to increasing the plant cover of some farms by 30 to 60 per cent in ten years.<sup>7</sup> The Wuyuan region has significant potential for ecotourism, for which there is a growing demand among city dwellers who are turning to provinces in the interior (which have become 'leisure gardens': *xiuxian de houhuayuan* 休闲的后花园). Declared a demonstration zone by the Ministry of Tourism of the People's Republic of China, the rise of ecotourism in Wuyuan is based on an undegraded natural heritage (*shengtai* 生态), as well as its cultural heritage (*wenhua* 文化).<sup>8</sup> Shaped by tea growing, which dates back to the Tang dynasty,<sup>9</sup> and by the rise of forestry under the Ming and Qing dynasties,<sup>10</sup> the county is particularly attractive due to its landscapes. Many centuries

of respect for the precepts of *fengshui* have helped to protect the Houlong (后龙) and Shuikou (水口) forests.<sup>11</sup> This collective celebration of landscapes is not new in China and, as the geographer Augustin Berque reminds us, it comes from a long tradition: "always and more than ever enduring, through this rise in tourism and contemporary environmental awareness, this feeling [for nature], and its landscape expression, has distant origins. It has indeed been a long time since, in China, the landscape has been about *sensus communis* [common sense], in which the whole of society is recognized."<sup>12</sup> But despite the development of the Wuyuan community and the fascination inspired by its magnificent landscapes, throughout its visit the Committee was constantly reminded of the imminent ecological challenge

3. *Camellia sinensis* and erosion of red soil at Dazhangshan.

7. GAO-LU-XIAO 2008.

8. WU 2002.

9. WANG 2014.

10. LIANG-LI 2007.

11. JIANG 2008.

12. BERQUE 1995, p. 77 (translation from French text).



4. Shitao (1642-1708),  
*Huang Shan Tu*.

facing China. In fact, the record growth achieved over the last few decades has only been obtained at the cost of major environmental degradation.<sup>13</sup> Fairtrade certifications, organic farming, and ecotourism try to unite economic development and environmental issues.<sup>14</sup> If environmental policy after 1949 tended to be that of “the war against nature,”<sup>15</sup> the central government is now proposing a new programme that can be summed up in the phrase “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明). Used for the first time by Hu Jintao in 2007, the expression has been part of the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party since 2012.<sup>16</sup> In response to several decades of industrialization, based mainly on the western model, the concept proposes a balance between the future of modern civilization and protection of the environment. Fuelled by socialist theoretical reflection, especially in the United States,<sup>17</sup> this search for harmony with nature is also an attempt to rebuild Chinese modernity, while reviving a long philosophical tradition.

### Rethinking the Anthropocene in China: the Sinocene

Beyond its political effectiveness, the “ecological civilization” programme is an invitation to reassess the Anthropocene from the standpoint of China. Although it is now actively participating in the global climate imbalance and the sixth mass extinction by mining, deforestation, and CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, China, through the diversity of its territory, the richness of its history, and the power of its philosophical tradition, offers a significant resource for a reflection upon the Anthropocene. As Sébastien Scotto di Vettimo and Hiav-Yen Dam note: “considering the Anthropocene in China is to consider a vast number of time-related and spatial, local and regional, anthropological and ecological levels, which require a strengthened interdisciplinary approach.”<sup>18</sup> The diversity of territorial levels involves the visit to the organically farmed hillsides of Dazhangshan in the global challenge that is promised by ‘ecological civilization’. However,

rethinking the contemporary ecological crisis through multiple timescales requires a ‘long term’ approach to history by making the ‘role of the environment’ visible.<sup>19</sup> Two disciplinary fields guide China’s ecological history. The first follows a philological and artistic path which, by passing through Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, reveals an elitist, aesthetic, and sometimes mystical relationship to ‘nature’ and to mythical landscapes, places which exist but which are portrayed as legends, travelled by ‘journeys in guest rooms’ and sweet dreams. A second path, associated with disciplines such as historical geography or environmental history, proposes a much darker story, made of successive deforestations, floods, large-mammal extinctions, biodiversity loss due to marshland draining, land reclamation in river deltas, and extensive and intensified cereal monocultures over the past thirty centuries.

### Landscape culture in China

Through journeys of discovery, poetry, painting, and garden design, Chinese scholars have developed a long aesthetic landscape tradition which appeared as early as the first centuries AD, namely from the end of the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220). A period of political turmoil, known as the Six Dynasties which did not end until 581, saw the rise of calligraphy and landscape painting which, according to Yolaine Escande, testifies to “a new conception of man who fully becomes a person”.<sup>20</sup> In Chinese, there are several words to say ‘landscape’ but “two terms express our landscape most commonly: *shanshui* and *fengjing* [...] the second is more common than the first”.<sup>21</sup> Starting from the 4th century there were signs of “the distinction between landscape arising from perception [...] *fengjing*, and literary or pictorial landscape, *shanshui*”.<sup>22</sup> The latter consists of the Chinese characters ‘mountain’ and ‘water’ and shows the importance of these kinds of places in Chinese landscape culture. “In fact, for different technical and climatic reasons [...]”

13. SHAPIRO 2016.

14. GONG-GONG 2018.

15. SHAPIRO 2001.

16. WANG-HE 2014.

17. For a reflection on post-industrial civilization, see MORRISON 1996 and 2007. And for a definition of ecological Marxism, see, among others, the works of David Griffin and John Bellamy Foster: FOSTER 2009.

18. DAM-SCOTTO DI VETTIMO 2018, p. 138.

19. BRAUDEL 1996, part one: *The Role of the Environment*, and BRAUDEL 1958.

20. ESCANDE 2005, p. 70.

21. BERQUE 1995, p. 72.

22. ESCANDE 2005, p. 70.





5

the great civilizations [East Asia] used mountain less [...]. But this material discrimination was accompanied by a spiritual development.”<sup>23</sup> Different philosophical movements have reflected on mountains. Confucius linked mountains and waters to virtue, while “Buddhism, spreading through China, was closely associated with mountain landscapes, especially in the form of *chan*.”<sup>24</sup> “If the mountain is the recourse of disgraced scholars [...] it is because the Daoist movement has established it as a sort of anti-monde, whose contrast and complementarity with the normal world of the plain structures the sense of Chinese *ocumene*.”<sup>25</sup> (figs 4, 5) Chinese

landscape tradition is so rich that it provides philosopher François Jullien with the necessary distance to question what was not contemplated by Western tradition. He therefore takes a fresh look at the European landscape, with its expanse of countries, and at the way it appears, from China. Thus, with no subject or object, the complicity, the co-creation, the resonance of minds, the tension between ‘I’ and the ‘world’ of the Chinese landscape reveals the dualist impossibility: “it does not go beyond it but reverses it.”<sup>26</sup> Yet the culture of landscape has remained the privilege of a small number of officials and scholars throughout Chinese history, and did

5. Shitao (1642-1708),  
*On Mount Huangshan*.

23. BERQUE 1995, p. 84.

24. BERQUE 1995, p. 82.

25. BERQUE 1995, p. 83.

26. JULLIEN 2014, p. 234,  
commented on by BRUNON 2015a.

not concern the majority because “even if they were immersed in this nature, farmers did not possess the elitist codes its representation”.<sup>27</sup>

### Considering ‘nature’

Beyond landscape aesthetics, Chinese philosophers did not fail to recognize ‘nature’ and to emphasize a monist worldview. Daoists like Zhuangzi maintained that man and the world make one. Its mysterious and indomitable forces serve as a metaphor for virtues, and Zhuangzi recommended the wise follow rather than oppose it: “the Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. [...] In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl. [...] Have you never seen the tossing and trembling that goes on?”<sup>28</sup>

Buddhism recognises the therapeutic effects of ‘nature’ for humans<sup>29</sup>, while the Confucian Mencius saw in the landscape’s regeneration capacity a metaphor for the human soul which, fundamentally good, can only improve, like the trees on Ox Mountain, if cultivated in a suitable way: “there was a time when the trees were luxuriant on the Ox Mountain.

As it is on the outskirts of a great metropolis, the trees are constantly lopped by axes. [...] People, seeing only its baldness, tend to think that it never had any trees. But can this possibly be the nature of the mountain?”<sup>30</sup>

But China not only thought of “harmony between man and nature,”<sup>31</sup> and its history is also that of a struggle against the elements. Confucian elites, attentive to the role of the State, encouraged intensive settled agriculture and commercial trade, in their eyes the only way of increasing property wealth. They considered the communities of farmers, fishermen and stubble burners to be lazy and inefficient, because they did not “deplete the fertility of the soil” (*jìn dìlì* 盡地利).<sup>32</sup> Over the dynasties, officials sought to improve their understanding

and control of the environment. Ingenious modification of waterways aimed to protect the population from flooding, while the study of climate and soil helped improve crop yields and alleviate numerous famines.

### The environmental history of China

The four-thousand-year-long history of China is punctuated by environmental crises under the combined influence of military conflicts, climatic changes, and threatening demographic pressure. The appearance of dry farming, mainly with the growing of millet, on the banks of the Yellow River and that of the rice fields along the Yangtze almost eight thousand years ago made it possible to feed a growing, settled population which, over three millennia, ended up becoming unified in a common interaction sphere. The use of bronze resulted in the formation of the first archeologically-recognized dynasty: the Shang dynasty. From 1500 to 1000 BC, they organized into city-states of several thousand inhabitants which specialized in the art of war and rituals.<sup>33</sup>

The demand for wood and bronze led to the deforestation of territories that were increasingly distant from the towns. Favoured by a colder and drier climate, the Zhou conquered the Shang around 1050 BC.<sup>34</sup> The rivalries between States, which would cease with the unification of China by the Qin in the 3rd century BC, required an intensification of agriculture and a strengthening of productivity made possible by the introduction of the plough from the 5th century BC onwards. These conflicts also accelerated deforestation in neighbouring lands, where large mammals and populations of nomadic pastoralists and hunter-gatherers, considered ‘barbarians’, lived. This was the case of the elephants which disappeared from the plains in the north of China, and near the Yangtze around 500 BC.<sup>35</sup>

The unification of 221 BC and, later, the accession of the Han dynasty, ended the constant wars between kingdoms, but this dynasty began a campaign of territorial expansion. The military offensives against their nomadic

27. BERQUE 1995, p. 81.

28. ZHUANGZI 1968, pp. 31-32.

29. DABRINGHAUS 2018, p. 282.

30. HUGHES 1989.

31. ROETZ 2013.

32. PERDUE 2016, p. 254.

33. MARKS 2017, p. 48.

34. MARKS 2017, pp. 56-57.

35. ELVIN 2004.

neighbours led the Han to clear and colonize Gansu in the north-west.<sup>36</sup> Located upstream on the Yellow River, the region's deforestation increased the amount of sediments carried downstream – their colour giving the river its name – which raised the riverbed and resulted in significant flooding in the valleys. A long dike-building effort therefore began, the maintenance and successive destructions of which caused many floods. The abandoning of military colonies following the fall of the Han led to desertification of the region which has since threatened the north of China. At the dawn of our era, China had sixty million inhabitants,<sup>37</sup> mainly grouped in the northern plains, whose primitive forests had completely disappeared and which had then become huge agrarian ecosystems managed by farmers and officials with the aim of increasing yields faced with droughts, flooding and invasions. From the 4th to the 14th centuries, successive dynasties tried to extend this farming model, set up by the Han and which survived until the 20th century, to the south.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in 1400, 70 per cent of the Chinese population was in the south, mainly in the Yangtze basin, which became the most densely-populated farming region in the world. Because of the wars that ravaged the northern provinces, this massive migration towards the south favoured the development of rice growing, which needed a large workforce. Despite new diseases, including malaria, a warm and humid climate and the introduction of better farming techniques allowed the southern plains to feed a growing population.<sup>39</sup> Under the Song dynasty (960-1279), it reached almost a hundred million, while the quantity of arable land fell, showing that the south was more productive. Furthermore, the construction of infrastructures – dykes and canals – and devastating military campaigns against enemies north of the Yellow River, exacerbated north-south disparities. With the Mongol invasions, the migratory waves continued further south towards Guangdong and Guangxi. Under the Ming, the massive

deforestation of these regions intensified erosion, causing sediments to flow along the course of the Pearl River, China's third greatest river, and formed a new delta.<sup>40</sup> Apart from cleared uplands, the silting of this delta allowed additional farmland to be reclaimed from the sea. With the Qing dynasty, the territory of the Empire reached its maximum expansion, annexing Taiwan, Manchuria, Mongolia and Xinjiang. As in the past, this increase was followed by woodland clearing and an intensification of farming, supported by new techniques and a broader commercial network. Migrants then established themselves in these new territories, often encountering resistance from indigenous populations. The typical cereals of the Han agriculture – wheat and rice – did not grow well in this new climate and were supplemented by maize, sweet potato, and tobacco from the New World, which helped the pioneers to advance.<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of the 19th century, the Chinese population was estimated at four hundred million, while the Qing dynasty seemed to have reached its ecological and political limits.<sup>42</sup> Weakened by foreign invasions and internal revolts, the pressure caused by exceptional demographic growth and participation in global trade led China to a serious environmental crisis. But this transition period is also that of great reforms. After the 1911 revolution, the Republic created several scientific institutions, whose experts in hydrology, geology, mineralogy and so on were quick to diagnose the ecological crisis. Unfortunately, conflicts in the first half of the 20th century only made it worse.<sup>43</sup> After inheriting a largely degraded environment, the People's Republic undertook to simultaneously resolve an ancient farming crisis and to industrialize the country by introducing a centralized policy which radically transformed the territory (fig. 6, p. 207). The 'Great Leap Forward' was followed by the deadliest famine in the history of China from 1958 to 1962.<sup>44</sup> It was only with the death of Mao, increased population planning and market reforms, especially in farming,

36. VERMEER 1998.

37. Imperial census which only counted inhabitants recognized as belonging to the Han Chinese ethnic group. See PERDUE 2016, p. 258.

38. PERKINS 1969.

39. LI 1998.

40. MARKS 1997.

41. RICHARDS 2003, p. 114.

42. The borders were fixed at the cost of military defeats with Russia, Burma and Vietnam. See PERDUE 2016, p. 260.

43. MUSCOLINO 2015.

44. DIKÖTTER 2010.

that living conditions improved. Rapid industrialization led to the largest rural exodus that humankind had ever seen, in particular towards towns on the coast, and today almost 60 per cent of the Chinese population is urban.<sup>45</sup> Emerging from almost thirty years of continued economic growth, China is now one of the greatest global powers. Although its opening up to international markets, technological advances, and the construction of major infrastructure projects have resolved its endemic environmental problems – floods, famines and diseases – China’s sustainable future remains uncertain.

#### Environmental ethics in China

If the history of China seems to be that of a long ecological crisis, how do we explain the fact that Chinese philosophy has thought so little about protecting the environment? On different time-related and territorial levels, today’s historians most often portray environmental degradation as unprecedented, alleviated by the introduction of technical innovations and access to new resources until the next time. While landscape aesthetics and the ethics of nature only appear to affect a very small group, how did China view its environmental problems? Even if it is true that the “Chinese landscape, in fact tended to deliberately count on the collective imagination and on [...] intersubjectivity,” can we really maintain, like Augustin Berque, that it “empowers itself in proportion to the physical environment”?<sup>46</sup> Historian Shen Hou offers a review of the hypothesis by which the protection of nature is a western, in particular, American, concept, introduced in China in the 20th century.<sup>47</sup> Her work explores environmental protection in the Chinese tradition per se, deliberately turning away from indigenous ecological practices, as well as an economical and sustainable tradition of managing natural resources in Han farming.<sup>48</sup> This investigation also poses the underlying question of Chinese modernity, or in any case the current state of its history faced with

contemporary ecological challenges. Preceding a comparative study between China and the United States on the concept’s conditions of emergence, she identifies four historical forms of nature conservation. The first finds its motivations in the legitimization of imperial power. Since the Zhou, each dynasty rules according to the will of heaven and protecting sacred places is a way of honouring the mandate of heaven (*tianming* 天命). Thus, the landscapes of the five great mountains of China (*wuyue* 五嶽)<sup>49</sup> have remained relatively protected over the centuries, as have some rivers. Another environmental consequence of an imperial edicts in the protection of traditional Manchurian landscapes from the 17th to 19th century. In order to preserve the ‘vein of the dragon’, the symbolic source of their power, the Qing emperors prohibited the Han Chinese from emigrating to their region of origin, avoiding the propagation of agriculture and forestry, while preserving the nomadic lifestyle of their people. The second is based on appreciation of ‘nature’ and in particular of the living things developed by Chinese thought. Classical Chinese writers have long been attentive to natural processes and were aware of the fact that civilization advances at the cost of profound environmental changes. This resulted in Confucian ethics promoting good resource management in order to improve yields, as Mencius recommended. Buddhism and Daoism advocated a degree of responsibility towards other species, the teaching of which influenced the decisions of some Mandarin officials. This is the case, for example, of Fa Xiong, 2nd-century governor of Nan who banned tiger hunting in his commandery. Primarily aesthetic motivations led to the safeguarding of Mount Wutai, in Shangxi Province, when Hu Laigong asked the Emperor to prohibit locals from cutting down trees in 1580. The landscapes around Buddhist and Taoist temples form the third kind of conservation, probably the oldest and

45. The urban population was slightly more than 58 per cent; XIAO et al. 2018.

46. BERQUE 1995, p. 76.

47. Oral communication by Shen Hou (Renmin University) entitled *Conserving Nature. A western idea?* as part of the conference *Environmental Pasts-Environmental Futures. Perspectives on China*, which was held at Peking University, Beijing, on 23rd November 2018.

48. As advocated by the Confucian philosopher Mencius. See HUGHES 1989.

49. These are Taishan (泰山) in the east, Huashan (華山) in the west, Hengshan (恆山) in the north, Hengshan (衡山) in the south and Songshan (嵩山) in the centre.

50. On this concept of plants, see BRUNON 2015a.



6

most constant. Finally, despite their limited scale and a certain irregularity that depended on migration, the protection and maintenance of *fengshui* sacred woods around villages and pagodas came from a popular and local practice of Chinese conservation. If this interpretation of environmental history seems to echo the political programme of ‘ecological civilization,’ equally it diverges from it. Conscious of the limitations and irregularity of these forms of traditional Chinese conservation, this approach has the virtue of drawing the resources to reconsider the relationship with the environment and the conservationist logic that characterizes contemporary political and ecological action from Chinese history and geography. However, it is still too reliant on a

certain idea of nature which seems incompatible with future ecological challenges.

### The agency of *Camellia sinensis*

Let us return, as a digression, to tea plants, sturdy bushes whose roots retain the remaining red sands of Wuyuan county before the river eventually ends up carrying them away (fig. 7, p. 209). They encourage us to think of environmental history in a new way: that of the power to act, or the ‘agency’<sup>50</sup> of *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*. If growing cereals is the result of a physiological need, if breeding horses, cutting down trees, and the extraction of iron ore can certainly contribute to military victory, what about tea? To which necessity does growing and consuming tea respond? Although fossilized traces dating to

6. China, thematic map: agriculture, vegetation, and topography, 1979.

- rice fields
- dry land
- boreal forest
- conifer forest
- protected forest
- grasslands and meadows
- marshes
- freshwater lakes and saltwater lakes
- rivers and water basins
- springs and water sources
- glaciers and permanent snow cover
- mountains
- mountainous arid lands
- deserts
- Gobi desert
- large cities and urban agglomerations (county level and above)
- railways and motorways
- coral reefs

thirty-five million years ago have been found, this species was only domesticated relatively recently, around 6,000 BC;<sup>51</sup> in other words after, or downstream, to use a hydrographical metaphor, of the three great cereal 'neolithizations' of the Chinese 'sub-continent' – millet, rice and wheat. Since then, tea has been a drink, a ritual offering, an alternative medicine,<sup>52</sup> an exchange value at the borders of the Middle Kingdom, a monopoly for the East India Company, an excuse for the opium war and a market for the Lipton company. "It is in accordance with these plant strategies that we have to reconsider neolithization, indicated Marijke van der Veen with regard to wheat in the Fertile Crescent, and all the consequences that it generated: settlement, land ownership, accumulation of farming surpluses enabling towns and social hierarchies to flourish – and, why not, class struggle, capitalism, globalization."<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis* poses the question of "cultivated biodiversity,"<sup>54</sup> whether at the level of the Chinese 'sub-continent', or at that of the biosphere. Here we would like to make a proposal for an ecological history, in its post-darwinian, political and etymological sense (*oikos*, 'house' or 'habitat' and *logos*, 'discourse') rather than an environmental history. This ecological history, formulated, at least temporarily, from the viewpoint of China, a Confucian, rather than Daoist or Buddhist civilization, a case of early anthropization, would, ultimately, be an environmental history (and not one 'of the environment') to be thought of 'without' nature, amid the Anthropocene. Let's remember that this concept, formulated by Paul Josef Crutzen, only dates back to 2000.<sup>55</sup> Establishing when this new geological era should begin is a problem that must be tackled by historians, with the necessary tools at their disposal, in order to be able to move forward. China, as Philippe Descola points out, represents the model of 'analogism', an ontological system which does not cease to establish links between what the West has distinguished as micro- and macrocosms.<sup>56</sup>

But, at the same time, it shakes the boundary established by Descola between interiority and physicality, his working hypothesis for *Beyond Nature and Culture*. At the time of the climatic upheaval and the sixth anthropogenic and planetary Mass Extinction, reconsidering the "Role of the Environment" (Fernand Braudel) from the perspective of the Middle Kingdom (*zhongguo* 中国/中國) would involve taking into account all the retroactivities, loops, interactions, disruptions which constitute, from the ecosystem to the biosphere, the very subject of ecology as a science established during the 19th and 20th centuries. It is to the neo-Marxist sense (Denis Cosgrove) of 'landscape' that we should thus return.<sup>57</sup>

Although Chinese scientists and politicians have clearly identified the seriousness of the environmental crisis, especially through the action of the National Environmental Protection Agency, this crisis has nevertheless encouraged the awakening of ecological awareness. For example, a 2015 documentary titled *Under the Dome*, which condemned the devastating impact of pollution on public health and the lack of genuine political measures, received more than one hundred fifty million views on YouTube. In Hong Kong, or Taiwan, ecological activism has taken over questions of national unity and the environment is now linked to the debate on indigenous identity.<sup>58</sup> We note that, by contrast, the Extinction Rebellion movement, which appeared in London at the end of 2018, had still not taken root in China at the time of writing.<sup>59</sup>

### **Beyond the Anthropocene**

The idea of nature, which exploded with the end of the "great partitioning,"<sup>60</sup> has practically no significance in classical Chinese thinking.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the latest works by Descola as much as Latour<sup>62</sup> give rise, in a complementary manner, to a major challenge, that of the political representativeness of 'things', including non-humans. We think that history has a role to play in these ambitions for a new *polis*. While

51. SIGLEY 2015.

52. Rich in epigallocatechin, epigallocatechin gallate, theanine and caffeine, tea is sought for its taste and its energizing and relaxing properties, as well as for its positive impact on health, in the case of green tea.

53. See BRUNON 2016.

54. BRUNON 2014.

55. CRUTZEN-STOERMER 2000, p. 17.

56. DESCOLA 2005. For English edition see DESCOLA 2013.

57. COSGROVE 1984. About Fernand Braudel, see BRAUDEL 1996, part one: *The Role of the Environment*.

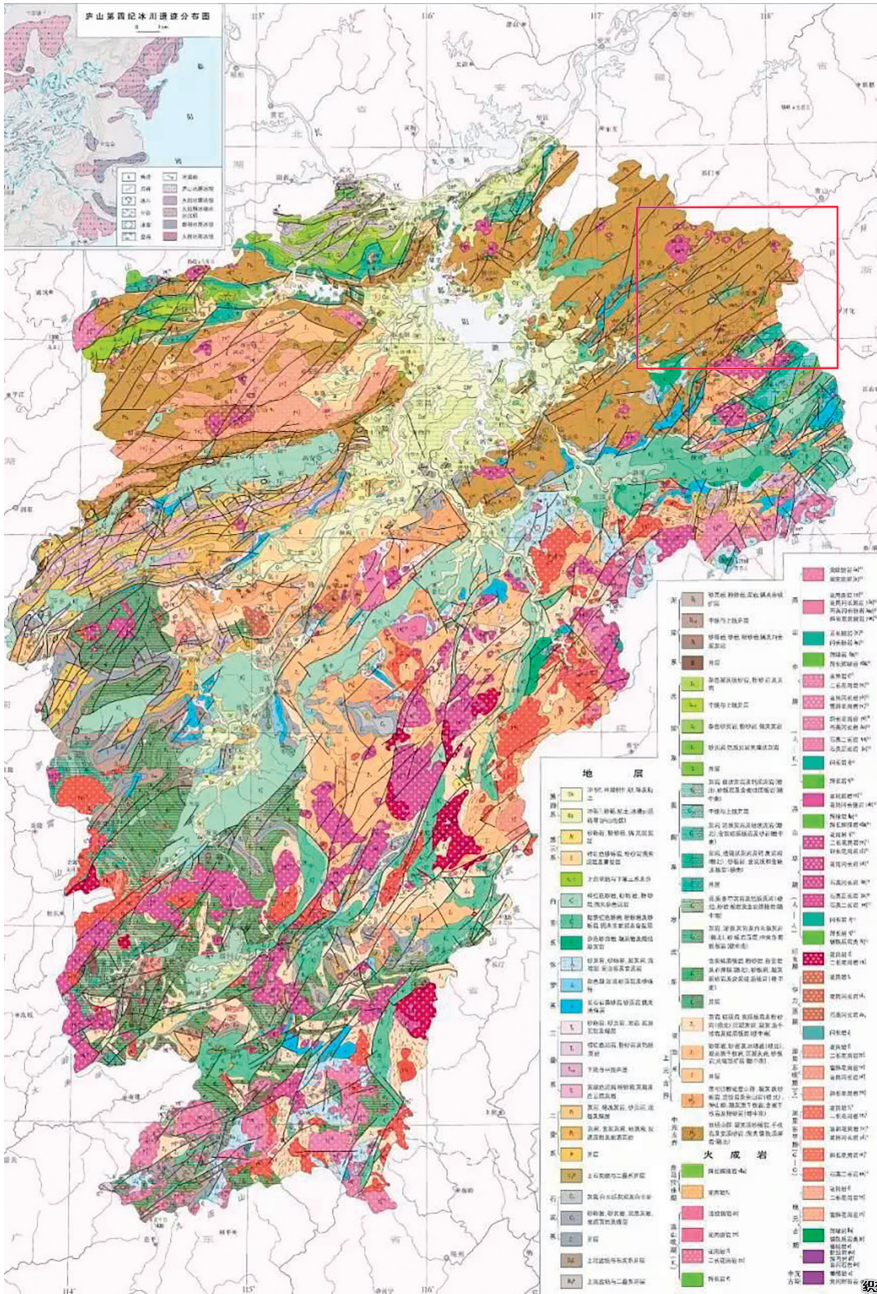
58. VEG 2014.

59. See Extinction Rebellion map 2018, in [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) (consulted on 26th February 2019).

60. CHARBONNIER 2015.

61. JULLIEN 2003.

62. DESCOLA-CHARBONNIER 2014, LATOUR 2015, see also DESCOLA 2018.



7. Geological map of the province of Jiangxi. The box shows the territory of Wuyan county.

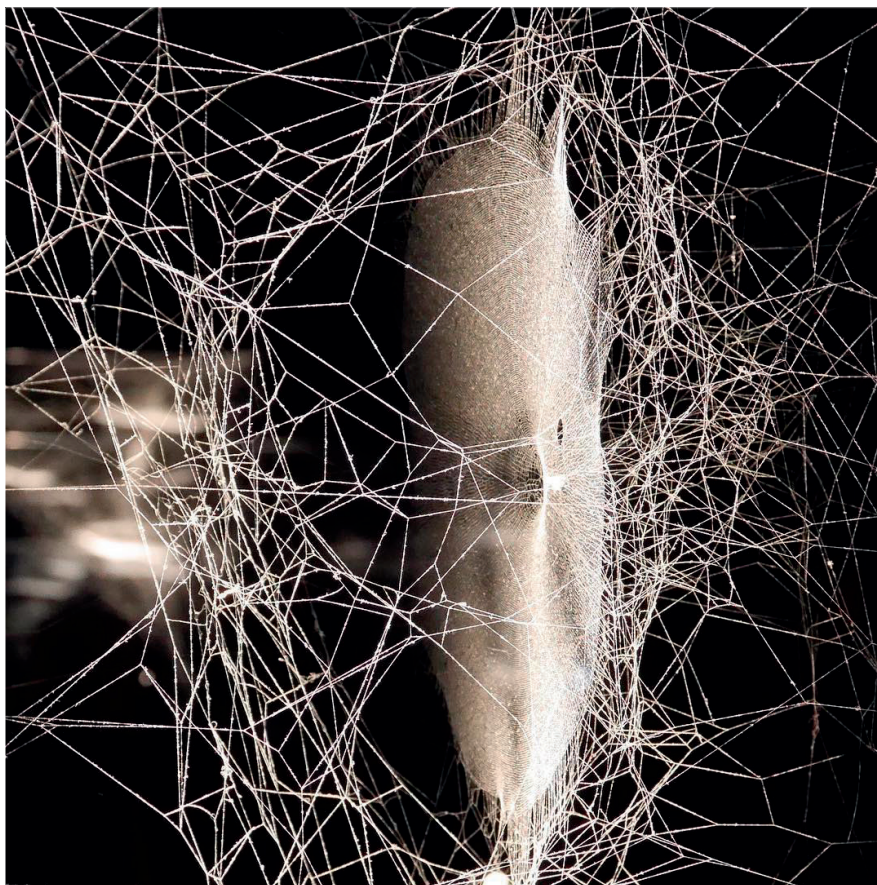
the pre-Socratic Greeks were the first to distinguish between *nomos* and *phusis*, it is up to the 21st century to formulate a type of human action on earth that would involve – to paraphrase Arne Naess – treading lightly.<sup>63</sup> ‘Deep ecology’ must now combine with ‘deep history.’<sup>64</sup> Ecological history, as a branch of

environmental humanities, has to think of itself as militant, just as ‘environmental humanists’ must try to inform themselves about the latest developments in these new epistemic fields that are the anthropology of nature (Philippe Descola), the political philosophy of nature (Pierre Charbonnier),

63. NAESS-ROTHENBERG 1995.

64. MORTON 2009.

8-10. Installations by the Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno.



8

environmental ethics (John Baird Callicott), the environmental history of colonialism (Paul Guilibert, Zahia Rahmani) and so on.<sup>65</sup>

By way of an open conclusion, we could borrow a metaphor to help us define the epistemological contours of this history: different species of spiders that have never lived together weaving their web in the air. The image comes from an installation by Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno on the occasion of a *Carte blanche* exhibition at the Palais de Toyko, titled *On Air* (figs 8-10).<sup>66</sup> Saraceno and the artists' collective working with him imagine the Aerocene, a new geological era during which humanity seeks to escape from hell by colonizing the Apollonian space of the atmosphere rather than the 'stratigraphic' space of the geosphere resembling a dream by Jules Verne (*Voyage to the Centre*

*of the Earth*, 1864). In other words, now that we are in the era of Web 3.0, we are calling for a construction site that is both collective – in the sense of the adjective substantivized by Latour – and planetary, in which most of the global scientific community should participate.

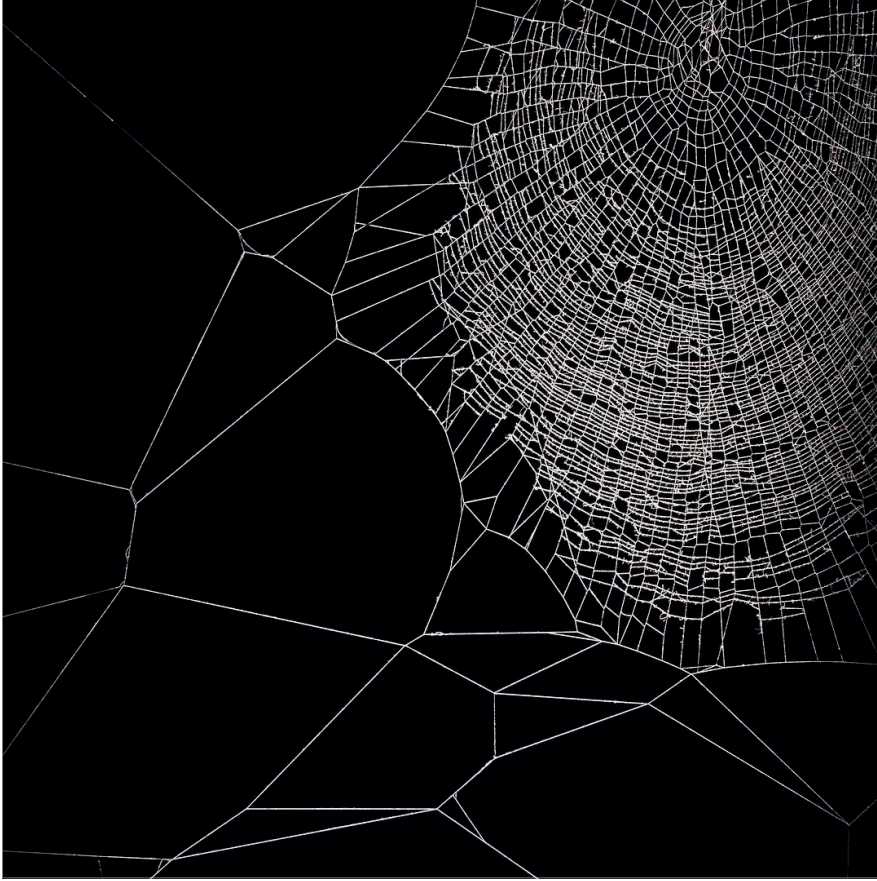
Ecological history is environmental history that has found closure by turning away from nature. It is an autonomous expression of modern western thought that came into being when the 'hard sciences' (*Naturwissenschaften*) split away from the 'human sciences' (*Geisteswissenschaften*). History offers a varied heritage of nature, culture and memory. A reappropriation of this polymorphous heritage proposes a promising alternative to the dualist tradition of naturalism and romantic aesthetics which today still haunt the debates on the Anthropocene. Ecological consciousness<sup>67</sup>

65. See among others BOURG-PAPAU 2015, CALLICOTT 2010, GUILLIBERT 2014, *Paradis perdu. Colonisation des paysages et destruction des éco-anthroposystèmes* (online in paradisperdu.hypotheses.org).

66. See DEMOS 2017, MUGNIER 2018, GADANHO 2018.

67. LEOPOLD 1972.





9

is, in a way, a call to reconsider the dichotomy between cultural history and environmental history, in order to prepare ourselves better for a future that is still very uncertain today.

In fact, appropriating this heritage in today's context provides a promising alternative. Chinese thought, partly filtered through Japan, has long served as an alternative to European modernity. As an extension of these elements for reflection, and cutting across the progressive conservative impasse of modernity, we venture that history should now take and follow an ecological tangent.

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10

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