



Nature and Culture in China

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What to say about the perception of nature in China today? The Chinese language proposes to consider what we call “nature” as “[what is] so from itself”, *ziran* 自然. This view of nature as being what occurs spontaneously refers to the phenomena which happen independently of the human will and whose mysterious origin may arouse our questioning and our wonder, such as the germination of a seed or the growth of an individual. It refers, on the one hand, to the idea of a principle which imposes itself upon human beings and on the other hand, to the dominant trends of Chinese thought which advocate the permanent balancing of humans to the world’s spontaneous movement. Simultaneously, China is known for the long history during which it has intensively transformed and exploited nature, on the initiative of its leaders, since its legendary emperor Yu the Great who is associated to the building of canals around 2200 B.C.



On the one hand, the setting of the first National Park of the country in 2006 shows that the management of nature is dominated by the political view, without concern for this of the classical thinkers. On another hand, the physicians' horizon of refining in order to adjust oneself to the rhythm of nature seems no longer topical further to the redefinition of Chinese medicine under Mao’s government. Globalization currently fosters the spread of the idea of interdependence of everything at the basis of ecology as well as the multiplication of meetings between China and the West. And if these phenomena had an influence on the future of China’s contribution about nature?

A place to be marked by the culture of the political order

China’s first National Park (*Zhongguo di yi ge guojia gongyuan* 中国第一个国家公园¹), which opened in Northwestern Yunnan on the 1st of August 2006, provides a good example to grasp a first facet of the current notion of « nature » in China.



Location map of Pudacuo National Park

base map: Daniel Dalet, © histgeo.ac-aix-marseille.fr, CAD: Valérie Vandenabeele

1 The phrase “National Park” has been misused to refer to Chinese “national-level nature reserves” (*guojia ji ziran baohu qu* 国家级自然保护区) in Western literature.

This achievement results from the initiative of a US NGO and above all from the will of the political authorities of the Diqing prefecture and the Shangrila county. The objective of developing mass tourism led to the choice of an area situated at around one-hour drive from the prefectural capital and its airport, without concern for the pollution caused in this area by previous tourist activities. Nature has been laid out to allow visitors to discover high altitude lakes surrounded by mountains, which correspond to the ideal Chinese landscape combining mountain and water, the “*shanshui* 山水”.



Shudu lake or the « shanshui » ideal landscape,
10/2008, ©Valérie Vandenabeele

Travelers are invited to discover the local setting via a winding road of about sixty kilometres, which crosses meadows and forests. Every element of the layout fosters the impression of having a low impact on the environment: supposedly “ecological” buses and toilet, stopping platforms and wooden signs, footbridges which seem to integrate respectively among trees.



An environmentally-friendly footbridge
11/2009, ©Valérie Vandenabeele

Simultaneously, the visit gives the opportunity to learn that the preserved state of the park's spaces results from the culture of the local Tibetans. These are not necessarily seen by travelers and are portrayed as spontaneously respectful of the natural environment as a result of their practice of Tibetan Buddhism and their agropastoral lifestyle. This statement which values Tibetans and acknowledge their ability to manage the natural environment is recent and is in line with the tourist discourse which identifies "minority nationalities", that is non-Han Chinese, to the concern for the natural environment, discourse which bases Yunnan's economic development through tourism since the end of the 1990s. It also echoes the "green Tibetans" imagery, which ascribes the Tibetans the faculty to live in harmony with nature and to have an innate knowledge of its mechanisms, imagery which was developed at the initiative of the WWF and the Tibetan Government in Exile since 1985. Hence the incredible success of the park, where more than two million persons had gone three years and a half after its opening, for a fee of 190 yuan (about 19€ at that time), allowing the prefectural government to obtain more than 350 million yuan of income.

But for the local political decision-makers, this presentation is only a tourist argument and the relationship to nature of the Tibetan villagers who live in the park or in its surroundings has no interest. Only their view counts: that of a nature to exploit and of a wild space on which to impose their seal and whose "barbaric" populations are to be civilized, which concurs with that of former emperors. On the one hand, they seek to take advantage of the Pudacuo area through the "National Park" certification label. On the other hand, they have shaped the local space and they aim at sinicizing local Tibetans in giving them allowances which ensure their better integration to the consumer society and contemporary China (Vandenabeele 2018).

Nature as horizon for the man of culture

Nature has also been instituted as a life principle with which it is necessary to match by the classical thinkers such as the Taoist Zhuangzi (4th century BC) and Laozi (6th to 5th century BC), the followers of the analogical thought and the Buddhists. For them, we have to melt into what occurs spontaneously, to live in a state considered as "non-action or rather action-which espouses nature" (*wuwei* 无为) (Cheng 2002 : 133). Among other things, this horizon consists in learning to manage one's emotions and in accepting what happens, and it would enable to experience a long and nice life as well as to accede to the aptitude of knowing which gives little importance to the intellect.

This ideal lies at the heart of "the martial, gymnastic, respiratory, visualising and mental concentration techniques, trance or hypnosis techniques" developed in Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Chan meditation (zen in Japan), which were gathered within *qigong* (气功), literally "the work on *qi*", that is "on breath, on energy", at the beginning of the twentieth century (Despeux 1997 : 268).



A retired physician expert in *taijiquan* in Kunming,
03/2018, ©Valérie Vandenabeele

The aim of these techniques shows how the human body and health are considered in China. By example, it comes from the view of the world as a set of elements animated by this same thing called *qi* 气, from which it follows that the body is permeable to its surroundings. In addition, the recommendation not to follow the intellect refers to the idea that the individual's guide lies in his heart/mind (*xin* 心) rather than in his brain. And again: the recommendation to manage one's emotions refers to the idea that the disorder of the mind can induce a disorder of the body. These techniques are at the basis of the traditional training of doctors because they are considered to enable the development of the skill to perceive disorders and to regulate them. The more a therapist engages in the work on his *qi*, the more he would be able to disregard his emotions, to be fully aware of his feelings therefore to be sensitive to the imbalances that affect the bodies of his patients. In other words, medical expertise is seen as the result of the physical refining of the doctor. This is shown through the therapeutic massage *tuina* 推拿 and acupuncture, in which the therapist must mobilise his body to supply the patient with *qi*, giving his own *qi* or being the channel of the *qi* of the cosmos.

However, this reasoning does not lie in the activity of most of practitioners today. The desire to make Chinese medicine credible to Westerners led to its "modernisation", under the aegis of the intellectuals of the beginning of the twentieth century and Mao. References to notions that could be seen as "superstitions" and which were supposed to have no role in the therapeutic process such as *qi* now have little importance in the Chinese medicine university curriculum. The practice of Chinese medicine by persons who do *qigong* has nonetheless not totally disappeared. But what about the way they perceive body and health today, in the context of marginalisation of their analysis framework and of the predominance of biomedicine? How do they live their sensory refining while Chinese society glorifies cerebral formulation? Do their practices lead them to experience the Chinese classical representations of body and health? Do they consider them as knowledge? As beliefs?

This situation brings back to the opposition between the invitation to conform to nature expressed by classical thinkers and the will of political leaders to subjugate it. Keeping this tension in mind, we can wonder whether Chinese still explain illness as the result of the imbalance between the human body and the world's spontaneous movement; to what extent they consider that the solving of health problems requires the resort to biomedical invasive techniques; or what became the perception of nature as an horizon of human development.

Nature and culture in globalized China

The interrelation between nature and culture takes several forms in China and is structured around a strong tension between politicians and thinkers. Today, it tends to spread all over the world via the increasing importance of Chinese immigration and the attraction of more and more Westerners for this cultural melting pot. On the one hand, the exploitation of natural resources and the sensitization of “wild lands”, that is “non-Han”, are now taking place very largely, from Laos to Africa and South America. On the other hand, the omnipresence of the idea of interdependence between everything at the basis of ecology, the distrust for biomedicine and the rejection of the perception of the world through an approach exclusively intellectual in the West make it a fertile ground for Chinese classical thought.

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