1. Introduction

“Nature” and its adjective “natural” are two of the richest words in the English language and are employed in a wide array of contexts. In music, a natural note is one that is not modified by a sharp or a flat. In gambling, a natural is a combination of cards or dice that immediately wins the pot. In the cultural sphere nature and the natural are sources of contentious debate. Should wildernesses be preserved free from human interference, and if so, does this make them more “natural” or not? Is genetically modified food no longer “natural” and therefore unfit for human consumption? It is hardly possible to invoke the word nature without wading into a sea of debate and discussion. Although the aim of this chapter is to see what debates and discussions about nature took place within the context of Chinese religion and philosophical, it is important to begin by recognizing that the modern Western idea of nature is a historical construct that has been shaped by thousands of years of debate within European traditions.

Today, nature most commonly refers to the biophysical reality of the environment—the sum total of vital processes on which human life depends. This view of nature is a product of the European Enlightenment, which distinguished nature on the one hand from the “supernatural” realm of magic, ghosts and gods, and on the other hand from the human world of arts and letters. This category distinction is perpetuated in universities to this day, with their division of knowledge into human, social and natural sciences. It is worth noting from the outset that these categories of knowledge, so familiar to the modern West, arose for particular historical reasons, and are not easily observable in other cultures or in other eras. Our modern debates about nature, environment and ecology are the product of seismic changes in how we have come to understand the relationship between human beings, the “natural world” of the lived environment, and the transcendent world. To the children of Darwin, human beings are part and parcel of the evolutionary continuum which transcends and humbles human beings in the face of 15 billion years of cosmic evolution. To the children of Biblical patriarch Abraham, the more than two billion Jews, Christians and Muslims of the world, humans are creatures of God with immortal souls, set apart from the rest of “nature” with divinely-ordained powers and responsibilities. The tension between these two worldviews underlies the contemporary debate about nature and the environment and makes it one of the defining issues of contemporary politics.

To discuss “nature” and all that is “natural” thus invokes the profoundest of existential questioning about the human condition and our place in the universe. It also invokes fundamental ethical questions such as relationship with non-human animals, environments and ecosystems. To raise the question of “nature”, then, is to raise the question of the exis-
ential orientation of humanity within the cosmos. This truism holds good for Chinese civilization just as much as it does for the West. Chinese philosophers fiercely debate the precise nature of the relationships that obtain between human beings and the vast processes of the cosmos that enfold us and give us life. Buddhists develop enormously complex cosmological models that tie human ethical action and mindfulness to the lived experience of the universe through the inexorable process of cause and effect known as karma. Daoists view human life as part of the natural generative vitality known as the Way, a spontaneous process that recursively transforms into ever more rich and subtle forms. A cursory glance into Chinese intellectual history viewed under the heading of “nature” thus reveals an enormously complex web of meanings that have evolved over three millennia of Chinese civilization and have involved interaction between China, India and, more recently, the West. To make sense out of this vast array of information requires imposing a somewhat artificial framework, whether by historical periods or by religious tradition. Following the methodology of this present volume, however, this chapter seeks to explore some of the key themes that arise across historical periods and across specific traditions when the idea of nature is invoked in the Chinese context. Part three of this chapter explores these themes through specific cases and debates, the choice of which is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. But in order to approach this case material, it is necessary first of all to have an overview of the basic vocabulary that has been employed in China to talk about nature and all things natural. This vocabulary will thus reveal the core values and motifs that reappear in various ways throughout Chinese philosophy and religion.

2. Overview of Key Concepts

Given that the English word “nature” covers a wide range of meanings, it is not surprising that there is no single word in Chinese that covers quite the same semantic territory. The two modern standard Chinese terms are daziran and ziranjie which both have the meaning of the world of nature, indicating the biophysical reality of the natural environment. Both of these terms derive ultimately from the classical Chinese term ziran, which is associated most closely with Daoist ideas of spontaneity and following in accordance with the Way. Two other classical Chinese terms need to be discussed because of their significance in philosophical and religious discourse. The first of these is tian, whose basic meaning is the sky or the heavens. This term has the meaning of nature in the sense of that which happens independently of human volition. It is linked to ideas of fortune, good or ill, and to the function of religion in attempting to mediate between human desire and cosmic reality. The third of these three terms is xing which means nature in the sense of innate vitality, and also human nature. It is also linked to ideas of sexuality, gender, and procreation on the one hand. Together these three terms, ziran, tian and xing cover much of the range of the English word “nature” but with distinct contours and emphases that reveal much about how Chinese traditions have viewed human beings and their relation to the universe beyond.
2.1 Spontaneity

The concept of spontaneity or “naturalness” (ziran) is a core value of classical Daoist philosophy, and can be contrasted with dependence upon external forces or powers. Chapter 25 of the Daode jing (The Way and Its Power) contains the classic statement of this view:

Humans follows Earth
Earth follows Heaven
Heaven follows Dao
Dao follows its own spontaneity

As this paragraph makes clear, to follow “one’s own spontaneity” is contrasted with following some external principle or ruling force. The Dao does not follow some externally imposed model or set of guidelines, but rather is so in and of itself. The core value of the Dao, therefore, is to be self-generating. As Cheng Chung-ying writes:

One important aspect of tzu-jan (ziran) is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or conditioning by an external power. (Cheng 1986: 356)

To be natural, in this sense, therefore means to derive creative power from within oneself. As Karyn Lai rightly points out (2007: 30), this idea of spontaneity is really the opposite of following nature, when nature is conceived of as some reality external to the self. There can, therefore, be no pre-conceived template or grand scheme for what is “spontaneous” since each act of spontaneity is irreducibly particular. If being spontaneous is understood as being natural, this does not refer to nature in the sense of a large-scale process that carries within it some driving force or goal. The Way, therefore, is not to be understood as the Way of nature in the sense of a transcendent metaphysical reality. Rather the Way is ideally experienced and engaged in the particularity of the self and, especially, in the experience of the body.

The to follow the Way, therefore, means to be natural in the sense of developing one’s own internal dynamic of spontaneity. This is understood in terms of acquiring virtue or power (de), the second of the two concepts thematized in the Daode jing. To be filled with such an internal power is a personal and uniquely particular experience, but it also connotes a form of engagement with the world of nature, understood as that which is external to the body. Frequently this is understood in a salviﬁc way: those who follow the Way and gain inner power (de) are able to foster longer life and prevent disease and death.

Daode jing ch. 55 puts this particularly well:

Be filled with De, / Like a baby:
Wasps, scorpions and vipers / Do not sting it.
Fierce tigers do not stalk it. / Birds of prey do not attack it.

To be imbued with this natural power, a power that derives from the spontaneity of the particular individual and not from following a grand cosmic design, thus results in particular powers over the natural environment. Here the natural environment is understood in negative terms: it is a dangerous place full of dangerous powers that have the capacity to
bring about the untimely death of the individual. To be filled with this spontaneous, self-generated power is thus presented in the Daode jing as the way to be shielded from the negative consequences of the natural world, conceived as a locus of death.

An interesting comparison to this Daoist understanding of the spontaneous power of the baby, is the Confucian notion of the ritualized performative power of the emperor. For Confucius, the ideal ruler would be able to bring order and harmony to the empire simply by sitting on the throne and “facing south.” The ruler here is understood by analogy with the pole star around which all the other stars in the heavens rotate. The ideal exercise of power is thus an exercise that seems as though it is nothing. Simply by being properly located and disposed, the ruler can produce an organic influence that radiates about his person.

Whether this influence derives from the natural, spontaneous power of the individual Daoist, or from the ritual performance of the skilled Confucian, in both cases the desired goal is the exercise of some kind of authority over the space that extends beyond the individual person. The question of how to dominate nature, understood as the environing context in which the individual moves and operates, is a key question of early Chinese political and natural philosophy.

2.2 Heavenly Command

The term that usually indicates nature in the sense of an external context for human life is tian, the basic meaning of which is the sky. This indicates a basically astrological understanding of nature, in which the rotation of the stars and the other heavenly bodies was thought to have a determining effect on human affairs. This determining effect was known as tianming or “the mandate of heaven,” a phrase most famously associated with the authority given by the heavens to the emperor to rule. When a dynastic line came to an end, it was said that the mandate of heaven had been revoked and transferred to the new ruling house. But it is also possible to understand this concept more generally than the particular realm of political philosophy. In this case, human lives and livelihoods are understood as being at the mercy of external cosmic powers over which the individual has seemingly little control. Here, then we can see the same understanding of nature as before: a potentially negative force without which humans cannot live and yet which also has the capacity to destroy human life. This, then, is the power of tian, that is to say, the sky or the heavens.

It is important to avoid understanding this term in the metaphysical sense that is implied by the English term “heaven” with its rich allusions to religious ideas. The sky, for early Chinese thinkers, was not generally conceived as a paradise that was granted as a reward for moral lives. The closest parallels to this were the paradise lands that were envisaged not in the heavens above but beyond the mountains to the west, or off the coast to the east. In the Chinese sense, heavens means the space occupied by the heavenly bodies which followed complex patterns of rotation that were thought to have powerful influences on human affairs.

A key question for early Chinese intellectuals was to understand how the operations of nature and the rotations of the heavens could have such an influence on the human world. Here it’s worthwhile paying attention to someone who as something of a sceptic in this
area, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi (ca. 312–230 BCE). In his famous *Discourse on Heaven (Tianlun)*, he argues that the realm of nature and the realm of human society are not intrinsically related. He considers the question of heaven from the perspective of both unusual and regular phenomena. In terms of the former, he argues that rare astrological phenomena such as eclipses ought not to be taken as having some special significance for human life. They are merely the function of the constant operations of the various cycles of the heavenly bodies. In terms of the latter, the heavens regularly interacted with the human world by providing it with water, the liquid vitality that is the foundation of biological existence. Here, he is just as caustic as when he discussed unusual signs in the sky:

You pray for rain and it rains. Why? For no particular reason, I say. It is just as though you had not prayed for rain and it rained anyway.

In Xunzi’s view, therefore, the sky is an independent source of power and influence that is vital for human affairs and over which humans have no claim to power. This, then, underlies one aspect of his view of the human condition: we depend on natural forces over which we have no influence. This understanding of nature comes close to the English word “environment” when it is understood as meaning the external context or set of factors which determine the internal processes of a system. Heaven, or the sky, is an environmental variable for human livelihood. It exerts a determining influence, but the internal systems of human life and livelihood can have no influence upon it. As Xunzi writes:

Heaven does not suspend the winter because people dislike cold; the earth does not reduce its expanse because people dislike distances; the superior man does not alter his conduct because inferior men make a clamor. (trans. de Bary 1960)

Xunzi here portrays nature, expressed as the twin domains of heaven and earth, as purely external environmental contexts which operate independently of the human sphere. Indeed, in this worldview, it is a mark of sage that he is not perturbed by these environmental factors, unlike the inferior man who is enraged by changes to his circumstance or frightened by solar eclipses. The proper arena for human action, for Xunzi, was the human world.

Note, however, that Xunzi’s focus on the human world is not an end but a means. Xunzi advocated the same lofty spiritual goal as other Confucian sages, namely, forming one body with heaven and earth. His argument was directed against those who would seek the goal of harmony either by forcing nature to succumb to human desires, or by forcing human desires to succumb to nature. Rather the human social world and the natural environment operated on different principles and it would be folly to confound the two.

The stridency of Xunzi’s arguments help to make the point that his view was, by and large, a minority view among China’s intellectuals. Soon after Xunzi’s death, the intellectuals of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E–220 C.E.) solidified a system of thinking that wove together the political and the natural world into a seamless whole, one in which the operations of heaven were seen as responses to the human world. Heaven, earth and humanity were bound together by a principle of “stimulus and response” (*ganying*) with the emperor as the linchpin of the whole system. The principal architect of this natural-political philosophy was Dong Zhongshu (179?-104? B.C.E.) who sought to locate the legitimacy of the
Han empire in the harmonious operations of nature rather than in the despotic will of the emperor. He writes:

But the enlightened and worthy ruler, being of good faith, is strictly attentive to the three bases [heaven, earth and humanity]. His sacrifices are conducted with utmost reverence; he makes offerings to and serves his ancestors; he advances brotherly affection and encourages filial conduct. In this way he serves the basis of Heaven. He personally grasps the plow handle and plows a furrow, plucks the mulberry himself and feeds the silk-worms, breaks new ground to increase the grain supply and opens the way for a sufficiency of clothing and food. In this way he serves the basis of earth. He sets up schools for the nobles and in the towns and villages to teach filial piety and brotherly affection, reverence and humility. He enlightens the people with education and moves them with rites and music. Thus he serves the basis of man. (trans. de Bary 1960: 162-163).

In contrast to Xunzi, the operations of nature (understood here as heaven and earth) are vital for the political vitality and authority of the emperor. By serving the ancestors with reverence and symbolically tilling the fields, the emperor is showing himself to be a faithful partner in the triad of heaven, earth and humanity. If one takes Dong Zhongshu at his word, the symbolic acts of the emperor regarding heaven, earth and humanity constitute in and of themselves the very basis for his heavenly mandate. This indicates the dominant assumption of Han cosmology, namely, that there existed a reciprocity between human beings and wider cosmos which it was the emperor’s duty to cultivate.

If nature is to be understood as that which is commanded by heaven (tianming), the question that follows is the extent to which it is possible and desirable to negotiate with that command. Are humans simply to accept their fate, whether good or bad, or should they attempt to manipulate the environment so as to suit their own needs, whether through prayer, technology or other forms of engineering? There has always been a rich vein of religious activity oriented towards manipulating the natural world, whether by praying for recovery from illness, praying for good weather, avoiding natural disasters, or ensuring the fertility of livestock, crops and women. In modern Western society, these elements of religion have been largely overtaken by technology, and religion has reoriented itself around questions of spirituality and meaning. But an investigation of Chinese religion reveals that contending with nature, understood as one’s environing context (tian), must not be overlooked as a major focus of traditional religion.

Already we have seen how the Daode jing idealized the baby who escapes nature’s evil clutches through its own inner power. From this point of view, nature is something to be overcome by asserting the superior inner resources of the body.

For Xunzi, on the other hand, the harmony of the three worlds of heaven, earth and humanity was achieved by each operating independently according to its own principle. Here, nature is conceived as a discrete domain with no immediate significance to human beings. A similar view appears in the statement attributed to Wu Zixu (d. c. 484 B.C.E.) by Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.E.) in his Records of the Historian (Shiji): “I have heard that human masses defeat nature (tian), and nature indeed also destroys humans.” Wu Zixu, credited
with designing the canal city of Suzhou, seems to indicate that humans and nature exist ideally in a balance of power, a dynamic equilibrium created out of a mutual contention in which neither one gets the upper hand.

Lastly, the synthetic cosmology of Dong Zhongshu placed body of the emperor at the nexus of the three worlds of heaven, earth and humanity. Through his ritual gestures unity between humans, nature and the universe would be achieved, and harmony and prosperity advanced.

2.3 Innate Vitality

The third important term related to nature is that of innate vitality (xing), sometimes translated as inner nature, or life. This term is used as a complement to the term for heavenly command or fate (ming) discussed in the previous section. Innate vitality can be understood both biologically and psychologically. In biological terms, innate vitality refers to the sexual aspect of human nature. A fundamental fact of human nature is that humans reproduce sexually and are thus divided into two sexes. The basic fact of human nature is thus that one is, from a biological point of view, either male or female. This is not something over which one has any choice, and thus one’s biological sexuality is part of one’s nature, in the sense of something granted by heaven, and beyond one’s ability to control. Human nature, then, is a sexual nature, characterized by sexual differentiation, with male and female possessing different biological traits.

This dyadic or binary form was thought by Chinese philosophers to be fundamental not just to human life but to the very essence of the natural world. The cycles of the moon, the sun, and the stars followed a cyclical pattern which could easily be denominated in the terms of yin (female) and yang (male). That nature might be capable of nonsexual forms of reproduction was beyond the imagination of this binary paradigm. Time itself, as measured by the rotation of the sun, the moon and the stars, operated according to dyadic cycles, alternately phasing in and out of vision in the sky. This constant and universal heartbeat was this built into the very fabric of the natural world, at least insofar as human beings were able to grasp it.

In terms of psychology, innate vitality is the inner disposition granted by heaven to the individual, in effect, the internal aspect of the fatedness of human life, the drives, moods and dispositions of the individual that make up his or her basic character or personality. Each person’s “nature” or “character” (xing) is unique; it is the constellation of traits that drives the individual along his or her particular life path. Such traits can be molded by education or self-determination; they are the basic substance of one’s personality which can be cultivated ideally in the direction of wisdom. Much of Confucian moral philosophy was devoted to understanding the precise nature of this “human nature” and precise ways in which the civilizing functions of education, ritual, music and the arts operated upon it.

In a viewpoint that bears comparison with to Freud’s theory of the superego as expounded in his Civilization and its Discontents, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi famously noted that human nature was “evil” which is to say, deviant or errant, leading human beings astray from the goal of creating a coherent, optimal social system. It is worthwhile considering what these innate characteristics were, and why Xunzi thought they needed the tempering effects of civilization.
Firstly, nature (tian) endows humans with an acquisitive inner nature (xing). Humans desire to accumulate more and more, and this inevitably leads to strife and disharmony among people. Secondly, humans are envious and hateful creatures, and this erodes loyalty and friendship and leads to violence. Thirdly, humans are passionate creatures, with a “love of sound and beauty” (trans. de Bary 1960: 104). Following these passions leads to excess, disorder and puts excessive stress on the social fabric. In all these cases, nature imbues individual human beings with characteristics that invoke failure at the social level: our natural instincts tend more towards individual gain rather than social cooperation. The genius of Confucianism was that it recognized that cooperation, or social harmony, was the key to forging large-scale civilizations that could transcend the petty vicissitudes of kinship networks. Thus when Xunzi writes that evil is innate (in one’s nature) and good is acquired (through nurture), he is making a claim that virtue is not a attribute of nature but of the social group. Nature, whether understood as external power (tian) or internal disposition (xing) was not the proper arena for moral philosophy: only in the social sphere could morality be properly attributed to human actions.

Of course, Xunzi’s views were widely debated within the Confucian tradition. What remained constant, however, was a preoccupation with understanding the precise relationship between the achievements of human civilization and the natural capacities that were endowed in human beings at their birth. Central to this preoccupation was the figuring of human life as something new or different from the operations of heaven and earth, an order of being that was categorically different than the other forms of natural life, while also sharing many of their characteristics. While the natural world was shaped by the binary impulses of yin and yang, earth and heaven, the human world constituted a new kind of reality, one that operated in tension (both creative and destructive) with the forces that had given it birth.

3. Case Studies

The following sections present case studies and debates which aim to shed further light on how the ideas of nature that were embedded in the core values and motifs described above shaped human interactions with the natural world at the practical level. To do so, it is first necessary to recognize that this is not an uncontroversial exercise. Mark Elvin (2004: 470-1) concludes his massive environmental history of China, The Retreat of the Elephants, with the following observation:

The religious, philosophical, literary, and historical texts surveyed and translated in the foregoing pages have been rich sources of description, insight, and even, perhaps, inspiration. But the dominant ideas and ideologies, which were often to some degree in contradiction with each other, appear to have little explanatory power in determining why what seems actually to have happened to the Chinese environment happened the way it did. Occasionally, yes, Buddhism helped to safeguard trees around monasteries. The law-enforced mystique shrouding Qing imperial tombs kept their surroundings untouched by more than minimal economic exploitation. but in general, no. There seems no case for thinking that, some details apart, the Chinese anthropogenic environment was developed and maintained in the way it was over the long run of more than three millennia be-
cause of particular characteristically Chinese beliefs or perceptions. or, at least, not in comparison with the massive effects of the pursuit of power and profit in the arena provided by the possibilities and limitations of the Chinese natural world, and the technologies that grew from interactions with them.

It is hard to argue with Elvin that the pursuit of power and profit did far more to shape China’s physical environment than all its philosophies and spiritual yearnings. Doubtless, a similar observation could be made for all of the world’s cultures. In Confucian terms, the moderating effects of civilization are all too often insufficient to drown out the base desires for profit. Civilizations, in these cases, prove to be failures, as may be the case for our current way of life. But if Elvin is right to say that Chinese civilization failed to prevent the destruction of China’s environment, perhaps this should direct our attention away from the received view of China’s intellectual elite and their ideal of the harmony of humans and the cosmos, and search elsewhere for the cultural ideas which helped power China’s devastation of its natural environment.

A second argument for devoting attention to the relationship between theoretical visions and cultural realities is that the significance of human cultures lies in their small differences rather than their vast similarities. While humans all over the world seek to acquire wealth, play music, dispose of their dead, and mold their natural environments, they do so with an infinite variety of methods and results. The study of human cultural diversity is valuable in and of itself, and so is the study of this diversity in regards to its effects upon the natural environment. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to outline some specific instances of the ways in which Chinese patterns of thought about nature produced specific (and therefore different) modes of behavior in regard to the natural world. This may be far less transformative than the juggernaut effect of population explosions and economies based on the extraction of natural resources, but this does not mean it is unimportant or trivial.

3.1 Ritual Anxiety over the Transformations of Nature

The capacity of nature to transform independent of human volition, that is to say, its self-generative power (ziran) gave it an important role within Chinese ritual. This can be observed at many different levels, from state rituals down to the meditations of individuals. These roles were made possible by the theory of stimulus and response (ganying) according to which the various dimensions of the cosmos were thought to function in resonance with each other. The important point to grasp about such resonance was that it was by no means automatic. Rather, the function of religious ritual was to ensure that transformations in the natural world would evoke optimal corresponding responses in the human world and thus restore the balance between the two realms. The dangerous power of nature was that it was ceaselessly transforming itself, and so constantly moving out of alignment with human affairs. In the theology of Dong Zhongshu, it was the emperor’s sacred duty to ensure that these correspondences were maintained. The success and prosperity of the empire indeed rested on the emperor’s ability to use ritual in order to harmonize the dimensions of earth, heaven, and humanity. The fact that the natural order was undergoing a constant self-powered transformation thus brought about a sense of urgency to the
ritual life of the emperor, in that specific rituals had to take place at the right times and places to correspond with the changes of the seasons. This urgency thus entailed a corresponding anxiety on the part of the ritual functionaries, that the rituals would be performed correctly so as to ensure that the cosmic harmony was maintained. Similar ritual anxieties can be observed in many cultures when it comes to contact with culturally postulated sources of ritual pollution, such people from another caste, or menstruating women, or dead bodies. In China, however, such ritual anxiety derived not from contagion with polluting bodies but with a failure to keep up with nature’s relentless transformations.

Take, for instance, Dong Zhongshu’s discussion of the significance of the transformations in nature during the first month of spring.

The east wind dispels the cold, the hibernating insects and reptiles begin to stir, the fish rise up under the ice where the otter catches them to eat, and the wild geese fly north in season. (trans. de Bary 1960: 208)

The consequence of this transformation is that it imposes a ritual obligation on the emperor, referred to below as the Son of Heaven.

The Son of Heaven shall live in the apartment on the left side of the Green Bright Hall. He shall ride in a great belled chariot drawn by dark green dragon horses and bearing green flags. He shall wear green robes with pendants of green jade. His food shall be wheat and mutton, his vessels coarse and open to represent a coming forth. (trans. de Bary 1960: 208)

The change in the seasons thus required specific actions on the part of the emperor, a ritual response that corresponded precisely to nature’s changes. Moreover, these obligations were by no means confined to the emperor’s person. It was his duty at this time to see that the transformations in nature would be respected and responded to throughout the empire: only male creatures could be offered in sacrifice to the spirits of the mountains, forests rivers and lakes; no trees, nests, young insects or fledgling birds could be killed; and the bones of those who had fallen by the wayside must be collected and buried.

The self-generating power of nature thus imposed upon the emperor and his empire an obligation to adapt and transform themselves in accordance with it. The scope of these obligations clearly encompassed human obligations towards the natural world, such as not destroying nests or young creatures, but also extended to the wider social and political world. Indeed, the conceptual scheme seems to make no clear distinction between the social and natural worlds. Rules governing what we would now call the protection of the environment were intermixed with rules governing dancing, urban construction and military affairs. There was, it seemed, no limit to the nature’s power to insinuate itself within the social world of human beings.

Failure to respect this power and evoke the corresponding changes in the human world was barely worth contemplating:

In all things on must not violate the way of Heaven, nor destroy the principles of earth, nor bring confusion to the laws of man. (210)
If the emperor were to perform the rites of summer instead of spring, this would result in drought; if he were to perform the rites of autumn instead of spring, this would result in thunderstorms; if he were to perform the rites of winter instead of spring, this would result in flooding and snow. To be the emperor was thus to be in a position fraught with ritual anxiety at the urgent demands imposed by nature's self-transforming powers. One ritual miscalculation, and crops could be ruined, the empire would become a wasteland, and heaven's mandate would be revoked.

A comparable anxiety over nature's shifts may be observed in the more personal meditative rituals of Highest Clarity Daoism. Within the general theology of Highest Clarity, religious transformation was achieved through performing specific ritual actions that accorded with specific transformations in nature. These ritual actions enabled the individual practitioner to be transformed into a spirit being and ascend to heaven. Take for instance, the ritual instructions known as the *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao* (*Badao miyan*) contained within the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected* (*Jiuzhen zhongjing DZ 1376*). The second of these eight sayings reads as follows:

> On the day of the Vernal Equinox, and on the bingyin and dingmao days, at midnight look to the northeast. There will be azure, black and yellow clouds, which are the Three Pure Clouds of the Heavenly Imperial Lord of Great Subtlety. At this time the Heaven Lord of Great Subtlety rides the carriage of the eight effulgences, ascending to visit the Highest Jade Emperor. Seeing him, visualize in your mind blowing down in prayer as above. If you see the carriage of the Heavenly Lord [of Great Subtlety] four times, then in broad daylight you will have a dragon-pulled carriage with a feathered canopy come to greet you and take you up to heaven. (trans. Miller 2008: 203).

In this case, there is no clearly defined anxiety that if the ritual is not performed properly then the adept will suffer terrible consequences. On the other hand, the precision of the instructions indicates that only at the specific times and places will the ritual be successful. In this case, then, the adept will be obsessively following the transformations of the seasons in order to be in exactly the right time and place for the ritual to have its effect. There is here, then, a positive anxiety about performing the ritual in the right way so as to achieve the desired positive effect. Just as in the rituals for the emperor, the transformations of nature demand a corresponding change in the ritual actions of the practitioner. Indeed, the regular transformations of nature seem to be the very foundation of the regularity or repetitive nature of religious rituals. Given that the natural world has a strong cyclical element to it, the human world also must mirror this cyclical nature in its rites, habits and customs. The regular and repetitive nature of these human social rites reflect and correspond with nature's transforming power by acknowledging its regular and repetitive nature.

### 3.2 The Struggle with Nature

In the ancient Chinese world nature's power derived from its capacity to change and transform independently of human volition. This internal quality, known in Chinese as *ziran*, gave nature the appearance of being an external power or environmental force (*ming*),
something with which humans must grapple, whether by harmonizing with nature through rituals, channelling it through technology, or overcoming it in some form of spiritual apotheosis. Although the dominant ideological stance has been that of “harmony” rather than “discord” with nature, this does not mean that we should overlook the negative aspect of human relationships with nature. The struggle with nature was highlighted most forcefully by Chairman Mao, who led the Chinese people to struggle and defeat nature with an alarming utopian urgency. Judith Shapiro (2001) provides a wealth of evidence to argue that specific elements of Maoist ideology were responsible for the massive environmental problems that began to plague China in the twentieth century. In particular she identifies political repression, utopian urgency, and dogmatic formalism as three key components of Maoist ideology that each played an important role in exacerbating environmental problems or in hindering attempts to mitigate them. Altogether these factors constituted what Shapiro terms a “war on nature,” a war that was conceptually predicated on Mao’s philosophy of voluntarism in which ideas were viewed as “having the power to mobilize efforts to transform the material world” (Shapiro 2001: 67). Willpower would compensate for China’s lack of technological development, and ideas would “unleash raw labor to conquer and remold nature.” Shapiro continues:

“Man must conquer nature” (Ren Ding Sheng Tian), Mao declared, sounding the phrase that many Chinese mention as the core of Mao’s attitude towards the natural world. (67)

The impression Shapiro gives here is that Mao’s “declaration of war” on nature constituted a new development in the history of China’s relationship with its environment, or at the very least a new development in the conception of nature that was promulgated among the people. In fact the four character phrase “Man must conquer nature” has a long historical pedigree, and struggle with nature is a part of a long strand of Chinese thinking about the natural world that has deep historical roots and wide cultural resonance.

Take, for example, the myth “Jingwei fills the seas” (Jingwei tian hai), a classic tale from the Scripture of Mountains and Seas (Shan hai jing; 3rd century B.C.E). The myth tells how the daughter of the sun god Yandi drowned in the eastern sea. In death she was transformed into Jingwei, a bird who for ever after carried little branches and dropped them into the sea in a futile attempt to fill it up. The phrase Jingwei tian hai is now an idiom meaning “determination in the face of great odds,” and can be interpreted either positively as a story of the indomitable human spirit, or negatively, somewhat similarly to the English phrase “banging one’s head against a brick wall.”

It is of no surprise that in a country prone to devastating spring floods nature’s negative powers should be symbolized by water. In this story, the natural environment, in the form of the sea, provides the context in which Jingwei’s struggle takes on its meaning. Her struggle to fill up the sea with branches symbolizes the eternal struggle of human beings against their fate, a fate dictated more often than not by the power of nature to obliterate human life. In this story, nature commands or mandates the circumstances in which humans exist. Nature defines the contours of people’s lives, in the same way that in astrology the position of the stars and the planets creates the basic disposition for individual human lives. Nature demarcates the finitude of human existence and at the same time poses an existential challenge to human beings to overcome the limitations or conditions of exis-
tence that have been imposed upon them. These limitations or conditions of existence, especially in pre-modern China, may be concretely experienced by human beings in their struggles against the power of nature especially as revealed in floods and other natural disasters. In this regard the classical myth of Yu the Great who controlled the spring flooding is also relevant. Yu’s greatness consisted precisely in his ability to dominate the power of nature and provide a more amenable context for human flourishing.

An alternative to contending with nature can be found in the Daoist concept of channeling nature’s power in beneficial ways for human beings. Alchemists saw in nature a marvelous capacity for transformation which could ideally be adopted and adapted by human beings. In so doing they drew on a long tradition of longevity techniques, gymnastics and breathing exercises which sought to harness the natural forces inside and outside the body. The natural world was in this sense not something to be defeated or struggled against, but a resource that could be intelligently exploited.

To give a somewhat unusual example of how nature’s power could ideally be exploited, consider the Dujiangyan irrigation project. Dujiangyan is located just outside present-day Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, and was close to the epicenter of the disastrous Sichuan earthquake of May 12, 2008. To the east begins the mountain area where many Daoist sites are located, and which leads towards the western edge of the Tibetan plateau. To the west lie the rich plains of the central Sichuan. The Dujiangyan irrigation project was begun in 267 BCE and completed in 256 and was designed as a water conservancy project to regulate the flow of the Minjiang river so as to prevent flooding downstream during the spring thaw and to provide a constant flow of water for irrigation. The Minjiang river is separated into three main channels: one provides irrigation to 30,000 separate irrigation channels downstream; the second receives surplus water in times of flooding; the third provides water for the city of Dujiangyan. The project is significant from a water engineering perspective because it is the world’s oldest irrigation project in use today that is not built around central dam. Dujiangyan instead concretely represents the concept of channeling nature’s transformative power so as to serve human needs. It is, indeed, regarded as an example of the Daoist idea that the autonomous power of nature can be transformed into something beneficial to the human world through cooperation rather than adversity. The complex contains a Daoist temple immortalizing its architect, Li Bin, and is a popular tourist destination along with the nearby Daoist mountain of Qingchengshan.

Given the focus of religion on culturally-postulated superhuman realities deemed to transcend the mundane world of nature, it is not surprising that Chinese religions should also advocate views that tend to downplay the ultimate significance of nature’s power. Even if human beings are locked in a struggle for power with the natural world, this struggle can and ought to be transcended. More importantly, this transcendence is equally valid for those whose experience of the natural world has been uniformly positive. The immortal Juanzi is said to have delivered this speech before his final ascension from the natural world:

“I have wandered throughout the famous mountains, I have gazed upon the eight seas and wandered through the five sacred mountains. I have rested in grotto halls. I have delighted in the drooping fronds of vegetation...
and have enjoyed the call of animals, the streams gushing forth their essence, the hills lush with forests, the elegance of the hundred creatures and the rhythm of winter and summer. ... Now I have been urgently summoned away. Please let me take my leave from now on.” (trans. Miller 2008: 158-9)

This passage stands as a testament to the irrefutable religious demands for transcendence of the natural world, and to the ultimate conviction of a religious faith that the destiny of human beings lies not in the natural world, but in a world of their own imagining. Indeed, the powerful leitmotiv of Daoist religion has constantly been “My destiny lies with myself and not with nature / heaven” (wo ming zai wo bu zai tian), a powerful evocation of the capacity of the human subject to rise above the determining factors of his environmental context.

3.3 Nature as Moral Force

One aspect of the impact of Buddhism on Chinese philosophy was the attention paid to the problem of desire. This debate took place in terms of questioning the moral capacity of inner nature (xing), a term which also incorporated the sexual nature of human beings. The basic question up for discussion was whether the inner drives and dispositions of human nature should considered good precisely because they were natural. To what extent was the cultivation of one's nature to be understood as giving free rein to its authentic, innate characteristics, or conversely to what extent was the cultivation of one's nature to be understood as the reining in of those characteristics?

The philosopher Zhang Zai shared with many Confucian philosophers the assumption that principle of nature (tianli) was infinitely good. The problem, as in Xunzi, came to discussing how human nature (xing) could become so corrupt. Following the lead taken by the Buddhists, Zhang Zai placed the blame squarely on human desire: “Those who understand the higher things return to the Principle of Nature ... while those who understand lower things follow human desires” (trans. Chan 1969: 509). In so doing he allied himself with a long and distinguished history of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist thinking that saw sensuality and desire as a fundamental problem of the human condition. This insight, first articulated in terms of a fully-fledged theory of nature by Zhang Zai, certainly encapsulated one major approach to inner nature in Chinese tradition, an approach that emphasized moderation, restraint and a certain degree of asceticism. Zhang Zai's view was that sensuality had the capacity to deceive the heart/mind (xin), dragging the life of the individual as it were, off course and thus preventing the operations of nature from achieving their full fruition.

In this approach, human beings are not “sinful” in a Calvinist sense: they are not ontologically alienated from ultimate reality, nor are they existentially alienated from nature in a way that requires the intervention of a divine being or saviour to overcome. Rather, because of the power of sensuality, humans deviate from the Way and make decisions that are effectively self-defeating. Moral training therefore consists in learning how to overcome the effects of sensuality or, for the Buddhist, in avoiding them by living in a cloistered environment. This view of desire places the burden for transformation on the
psycho-affective capacities of the individual, rather than on some grand cosmic scheme for remaking the world or establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth.

But Zhang Zai did not always occupy the mainstream of Chinese thinking about the relationship between nature and desire, especially in the later Imperial period. Rather than taking the road opened up by Zhang Zai, later Confucians emphasized a materialistic approach which did not regard the principle of nature as a lofty spiritual ideal. Although Zhang Zai had argued that principle (li) could never be divested from material force (qi), and that one should not imagine some kind of ultimate reality independent from the process of the natural world, later materialists focussed even more on nature as vital force (qi). Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), for instance, saw no abstract principle of heaven or ideal nature beyond the actuality of the real processes of the material world. With such a strongly materialist philosophy it was even harder to advocate some sense of ideal human nature above and beyond the reality of the natural world. This did not mean that the concept of nature as “heaven” (tian) was abandoned. Rather it meant that the concept of nature/heaven could not be abstracted completely from the material world. To be natural thus meant following nature's vital force (qi) as much as it meant following its heavenly principle (li). Thus Wang Fuzhi proudly quotes the Book of Changes (Yijing):

“The great characteristic of Heaven and Earth is to produce. The most precious thing for the sage is [the highest] position. To keep his position depends on humanity. How to collect a large population depends on wealth.”


Wang's interpretation of this forthright adoration of nature's fecundity is a critique of those moral or religious doctrines that advocate the restraint of desire as the way of harmony with nature:

Thus in sound, color, flavor, and fragrance, we can broadly see the open desires of all creatures, and at the same time they also constitute the impartial principle for all of them. Let us be broad and greatly impartial, respond to things as they come, look at them, and listen to them, and follow this way in words and action without seeking anything outside. And let us be unlike Lao Tzu [Laozi], who said that the five colors blind one's eyes and the five tones deafen one's ears, or the Buddha, who despised them as dust and hated them as robbers. (trans. Chan 700).

Wang's point is that if one accepts the basic Neo-Confucian doctrine that heavenly principle (li) cannot be separated in any ultimate way from material force (qi), then it makes no sense to argue that human desires are the root of the problem of the human condition. The fundamental principle of nature is the flourishing of life. Desire is essential to this operation. Conversely, religious people who follow ascetic lives and advocate the restraint of desires do not properly comprehend the moral relationship between human beings and nature. Although Buddhists or Daoists may posit some ultimate reality, whether denominated as mystery (xuan) or Buddha-nature, such a concept cannot have anything to do with the real world of moral import, or as Wang puts it, “the correct activities of our seeing, hearing, speech and action” (700). The authenticity of nature—both human and non-
human—lies not in some transcendental principle but in the reality of nature's capacity for ceaseless production. As Wang puts it:

The fact that the things of the world, whether rivers or mountains, plants or animals, those with or without intelligence, and those yielding blossoms or bearing fruits, provide beneficial support for all things is the result of the natural influence of the moving power of material force. (Chan 1969: 698)

In other words, the mandate that can be derived from nature is not to be sought in nature as abstract principle (li), but rather in nature as material force (qi), the power to move, grow and transform, the power that drives nature to constantly flourish. One should not read this as a kind of hedonistic delight in nature's fecundity. Wang's message is thoroughly moralistic; but it is also deeply realistic in its appreciation that real world problems have to be dealt with at the level of natural, material reality rather than based on some idealistic abstraction. Recalling Elvin's observation that the lofty ideals of Chinese philosophy never seem to have been realized in the real world of China's environmental history, and with the benefit of hindsight, it is hard not side with Wang Fuzhi's plea to focus on the material reality of nature.

4. Conclusions

This chapter has explored some of the facets of nature within Chinese philosophical and religious traditions with a view to giving the reader a sense of how this highly contentious subject produced arguments and debates that are in some ways quite idiosyncratic and in other ways similar to debates in Indian or Western traditions. By ranging quite freely across traditions and historical periods, a picture emerges of a nexus of problems that the concept of nature evokes. These problems have to do with the proper moral relationship between human beings and the natural world, the relationship of the natural world to culturally-posited supernatural beings and their realms, and how to understand human beings as both part of nature and set apart from it. These questions are germane to all of the world's civilizations, but the ways of asking and answering these questions quite naturally vary according to the cultural traditions that have historically emerged throughout the world.

In one important sense, the contemporary environmental crisis has tended to put these various cultural traditions about nature into the background, and has focussed attention on solving real-world challenges such as species extinction, climate change, population growth, and water scarcity. In this context, Western views of nature and environment are often held up as a model to be avoided, given their emphasis on the transcendence of humans over the natural world. Conversely, Chinese ideas about the harmony of humans and nature are extolled as virtues to be embraced by the world in its quest for sustainable development and ecological balance.

The contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Weiming made the following argument regarding the Chinese encounter with modernity in the twentieth century (2000: 201):

The modern West's dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/
object) is diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking. Arguably, it is also a significant departure from ancient Greek, Judaic, and early Christian spiritual traditions. Informed by Bacon’s knowledge as power and Darwin’s survival through competitiveness, the Enlightenment mentality is so radically different from any style of through familiar to the Chinese mind that it challenges all dimensions of the Sinic world. While the Enlightenment faith in instrumental rationality fueled by the Faustian drive to explore, know and subdue nature spurred spectacular progress in science and technology, it also became a justification for imperialist domination and colonial exploitation. As the international rules of the game, defined in terms of wealth and power, were superimposed on China by gunboat diplomacy, Chinese intellectuals accepted the inevitability of Westernization as a necessary strategy for survival.

Here, Tu Weiming is proposing a narrative by means of which to explain the revolutionary changes that China experienced in the twentieth century: China’s intellectuals abandoned their holistic mode of thinking in which heaven, earth and humanity were considered parts of a mutually interdependent evolving cosmos, and instead adopted a dichotomous Western mode of thinking in which humanity is placed in opposition to nature. This choice was forced upon China by the colonial aggressions of the West in the nineteenth century, and was adopted as a “necessary strategy” rather than by free choice or desire.

While Chinese some intellectuals certainly advocated a “holistic mode of thinking in which heaven, earth and humanity were considered parts of a mutually interdependent evolving cosmos,” this is by no means the whole story of how China imagined nature. As this chapter has demonstrated, Chinese intellectuals pondered with deep sincerity nature’s capacity to destroy human life, its massive indifference to human suffering, and its relentless power to change and transform beyond the desires of human beings. Through technologies both religious and material, Chinese people sought to mitigate nature’s negative effects, to transform nature into a power for human good, and to imagine a world in which humans and the natural world could flourish in a mutually beneficial way. This philosophical ideal, however, stands as an unrealized dream, rather than a reflection of the historical reality of Chinese culture.

Chinese religious culture surprisingly reveals a more realistic and pragmatic pattern of engagement with the natural world. In temples across time and space, Chinese people, from the highest emperor to the lowliest peasant, all alike have prayed for blessings upon their crops, freedom from floods and famine, and healing for the sick. Praise for nature’s fecund powers was always tempered by a realistic anxiety about its capacity to destroy the living. Hovering in between these two realities was an glimmer of harmony and balance that was often sought but rarely achieved.

References


