CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE IN CHINA

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1. Introduction

The relationship between man and nature has in the past inspired a discourse which did not in all respects lead to an unanimous result but rather to controversies which are still going on. In philosophical discussions under the impact of western thinking we find the combination of impulses of Young Hegelian thinking on the one hand as well as an attempt to delineate contemporary modes of thinking in China from the classical tradition on the other. One example is the doctoral dissertation “On the Concept of Nature in Mao Zedong’s Teachings and its Roots in Early Chinese Philosophy,”1 which refers to the phase in Mao Zedong’s life when he was very much influenced by the philosophy of vitalism.

Thus the concept of nature has in China as well as in the West a long history of its own with a great variety of connotations.2 Whereas this historical relativism is in Europe taken for granted,3 the concept of nature in China is—even by western scholars—often regarded as unchanging and timeless. One answer towards this ‘immobilization’ (‘Stillstellung’)4 is the method followed by Hermann-Josef Röllike who takes key concepts as such without proposing terms of equivalence and only determining its meaning from the context of its use.5 This method, however, does only partially cope with the hermeneutical problem. This is due to the fact that concepts are not only determined by developmental processes, but that all kinds of relationships, intertextual as well as those of other kinds, have to be taken into account. Hence the search for adequate translations seems still to be helpful from a hermeneutical point of view.6

Thus an analysis of the key concepts remains central. For the semantic realm of ‘nature’ we do have tian 天, xing 性, sheng 生, ziran 自然. These terms have in China been reflected and disputed since the times of the early commentarial tradition. In the novel “Dream of the Red Chamber” (Hongloumeng 紅樓夢) Baoyu 碧玉, the protagonist, when walking with his father through the garden,

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1 Yang, Der Begriff der Natur in der Lehre von Mao Tse-tung und seine Wurzeln in der altchinesischen Philosophie.
2 See on this issue Roetz, Mensch und Natur im alten China, pp. 113ff.
4 See Roetz, Mensch und Natur im alten China.
5 Röllike, “Selbst-Erweisung.”
6 Meyer-Abich, “Heimat ist das, was werden soll.”
replied to him in the following way:

I have never really understood—Baoyu replied promptly—what it was the ancients meant by ‘natural’ (tianran) ... . ‘Natural’ is that which is spontaneously produced by nature as opposed to that which is produced by human artifice. A farm set down in the middle of a place like this is obviously the product of human artifice ... . It does not look even a particularly remarkable view. How could it attain to the pattern of naturalness of the other places we have just been looking at? Or their natural flavour? The bamboos in those other places may have been planted by human hand and the streams diverted out of their natural courses, but there was no appearance of artifice. That’s why, when the ancients use the term ‘natural’ I have my doubts about what they really meant. For example, when they speak of a ‘natural painting,’ I can’t help wondering if they are not referring to precisely that forcible interference with the landscape to which I object: putting hills where they are not meant to be, and that sort of thing.7

The discourse here is centred around the question whether or not artificial or manipulated nature can still be regarded as ‘natural.’ The father here just wants to propagate the return to rural simplicity, whereas the son Baoyu only accepts as natural that which does not show any human influence at all. This discourse illuminates another aspect, namely that dealing with the concept of nature in the case of traditional China as well as in other cases implies the constituting of the subject by ‘dealers.’

Notwithstanding all these methodological issues, in the following I will try a heuristic method that sheds some light on the ‘discourse with nature’ in China which I at first hand tend to characterize as man facing his non-social environment and at the same time fully acknowledging that man himself is part of nature. In China this last aspect plays a crucial role since, in Chinese religious traditions, human nature is not regarded as the result of a creator at least not as conceived in the Judeo-Christian sense. This definition immediately raises two other questions, which I can only discuss in passing:

First: Where is the boundary to the non-social environment? The answer is generally given by the method by which one differentiates between Inner and Outer.8 What is ‘outer’ or ‘beyond’ is the whole world of animals, plants and other objects and substances as far as it is not inhabited by gods, souls or ghosts.

Second: How constant is the delineation and what is the distinction between animated and unanimated nature? This implies the notion of life in general. In particular, it calls to the fore the whole and complex discussion on the function of ‘energetic spirit’ (qi) in traditional China.

But there was always a very practical and commonsense type of attitude prevalent in the daily life of the Chinese. In the search for an idyll in China, nature was very early discerned as a metaphor for safeness and regularity, as

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8 It is significant that there is no satisfying treatise on the nei/wai-distinction in Chinese intellectual history.