Daoism, the indigenous religion of the Sinitic civilisation,\(^1\) begins in 142 CE with the Celestial Masters movement. This paper explores the ideas and paradigms of the religious milieu leading up to the foundation of Daoism relative to Sinitic understandings of religious concepts applicable to the environment, ecology, and the relationship between mankind and nature. Furthermore, this paper explores the development of Daoism throughout the history of the Sinitic civilisation in order to show how Daoist ideas develop into the modern day, and how these ideas are appropriated by the modern world in discourses of ecology and environmentalism.

1. **Daoist and Sinitic Conceptions of Nature**

It is germane to consider some Daoist analogues to what in English are known as nature and the environment, as these terms have a particular semantic field shaped by specific cultural and historical conditions.

One term for nature is *ziran*, literally ‘that which is so of itself’. *Ziran*, as the phenomenal universe, arises spontaneously from the interaction of ebbs and flows in the *dao*, rather than being intentionally created with a fixed beginning or end. In fact, the *dao* itself is described as being *ziran*, or self-generated. Although cosmogonic narratives are as varied as the Daoist traditions, a common narrative alludes to a primordial beginning time in which reality as we know it is but an inchoate potentiality in the *dao*; in time, the *dao* separates and moves into distinct forces of *yin* and *yang*. As *yin* and *yang* encounter one another and mix in various combinations, the reactions form the phenomenal universe and functional operations of

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\(^1\) The term “sinitic” will be used when referring to the civilisations of the peoples creating and most immediately affected by a cultural hegemony today most often called “Chinese”. This includes the Han people as well as a number of ethnic groups related to and on the periphery of the Han. The term “Chinese” will refer to the modern nation-states of the Sinitic civilisations, and the culture created by and within the societies of those states.
reality. These combinations move the universe and reality along a cycle of creation and destruction, where yin and yang are waxing and waning, one in inverse proportion to the other. Yin and yang transform into one another, creating pneuma (or qi, the substance that makes up all that exists), the Five Phases (wu xing), and all natural patterns, which are of concern to Daoism. In this worldview, ours is a mechanistic universe where the laws that govern reality simply are, with no ultimate creator, point of inception, or teleological structure. The dao is that which is ultimately unchanging, that which remains constant in the face of the constant and cyclical change that is the hallmark of ontology. To practicing Daoists, deities emanate from the dao, but these deities are created from the same fundamental substance (qi) as everything else, including human beings. What makes deities different is the manner and quality of combination of the qi that comprises them. All things are ziran, being ultimately and spontaneously generated from the dao itself, and so even humanity is theoretically of the same substance as the environment and the cosmos themselves. Theoretically, then, there is originally a fundamental unity between human beings and their surroundings, but human beings gradually lose this through desire and grasping.

Another term for nature might be jing, literally ‘region’ or ‘area’. Jing is physical space as may be conceived of on a map, physical space in which the ontologically real can exist and move about. Sinic conceptions of space traditionally posit the Sinic civilisation, especially the capital of the Sinic imperium, as the centre and axis mundi, with all other space configured around it in the cardinal and intercardinal directions. A pre-modern term for the known world, jiuzhou, refers literally to the ‘nine continents’, configured in a three-by-three grid with the Sinic civilisation at the centre and progressively barbaric, wild, or demonic lands at the peripheries. For the purposes of discourse on nature and the environment, jing is roughly analogous to the Greek word oikos, (‘house’) which informs the semantic field of the English word ‘ecology’: the study of our ‘house’, the surroundings in which we live. It is a Daoist conception that demonic emanations cause the various ills afflicting humanity, and these come from the jing of the periphery of the human (i.e. Sinic) world.

Yet another term for nature is tiandi, literally ‘sky and earth’ or ‘Heaven and Earth’. In this schema, space is not so much horizontal, spreading out

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2 In fact, huanjing, the Modern Standard Chinese term for environs or surroundings, is composed of this jing preceded by a word for “ring” (thus, by metaphorical extension, an encirclement).