

## SOME APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN SOCIETIES OF THE PAST

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Communication dealt with four modes of environmental consciousness in the near and remote past: (a) practical action, as exemplified in the historical geography of pre-classical China; (b) the heroic and mythmaking vision implicit in the classical Greek myth of Hercules; (c) philosophical analysis, and specifically Descartes' treatment of the question of "animal rights"; (d) Goethe's integrated conception, as "poetic scientist", of the natural environment. The first of these sections is given here:

The latter years of the Shang dynasty and the start of the Chou dynasties, roughly 1300 B.C. to 750 B.C. in western notation represent the height of the Bronze Age in China. They afford us an all too easily recognizable outline of rapid and seemingly irreversible environmental impoverishment. It is instructive to examine this decline, and the way in which it was arrested.

The area which particularly concerns us is the ancient nucleus of Chinese civilization alongside and parallel with the central reaches of the Yellow River. Until the period in question, this area had enjoyed a very diverse biological environment. From the archaeological and literary evidence, fragmentary as these are, one can build up a picture of the area much different from what it was during the Han dynasty or is today. Uninterrupted tracts of heath and extensive wetlands encouraged the gradual growth of a truly astonishing range of fauna and flora, on which the restrained economy of scattered village populations fishing and hunting for food made relatively insignificant demands. Thus we find present not only the species which we might expect such as wild ox, boar, deer and a wide variety of wolves, foxes and so on but also subtropical "exotics" such as monkeys, tiger, antelope and even rhinoceros. The woodlands are similarly polymorphic where chestnut, elm, wild fruit trees, willow and cypress abound. The natural world and man are, if I may apply the Confucian symbolism anachronistically, in harmonious mixture.

This balance is now disturbed, not by natural catastrophe, still less by any internal process of reduction of species, but by human intervention. The employment of new tools and techniques of cultivation, and the availability of ground on which to exercise them, combine over a period of perhaps a dozen generations only to produce factors which will determine the fate of the biomass. One of these, quite certainly, is the aggregation of isolated communities into a more structured network of farming villages and estates. Another is the closer coherence of the rural populations with the palace-capital. A third-it would be reasonable to infer-is demographic: an overall increase in population density due to better nutrition and easier access to resources for preserving and extending human life.

These factors, in themselves positive, are, however, quite outweighed by other developments of a largely or entirely negative character. There is firstly the gradual encroachment of agriculture on the heathlands and reclamation of wetlands. Though the mechanisms are unclear, this seems to have caused or at least assisted in triggering a long-term process of dehumidification and lowering of mean temperatures. Whereas this impoverishment at least can be assigned to an ethically defensible motive, i.e. the desire to cultivate more effectively, the same can hardly be said-from the modern standpoint-for the other major factor, the indiscriminate consumption of natural resources for the purpose of hunting and sacrifice.

The practice of hunting for show was not of course confined to China in the ancient world, as can be seen immediately from, for example, the stone reliefs of Assyria at about this time. What can be said is that in China it reached its most destructive proportions. This is partly due to an identification of hunting with war. The weapons for both were hardly distinguishable, and the objective in each case was to amass as large a quantity of spoil as possible, in proof of good faith towards the ancestral deities and in support of the celestial order.

The scale of these hunting expeditions beggars belief. A single day might account for as many as three hundred and fifty stags. The correct performance of an ancestral rite might call for upwards of forty oxen to be slaughtered and the practice of "hecatomb"-to adopt the classical Greek term-slaughter of tens or hundreds of "special" animals such as albino pigs was standard and had its own technical vocabulary. For the funeral of a king or a great noble, of course, an exceptional effort would be required. In such circumstances it was unlikely that any but the most numerous species would survive to breed. Ironically, at the same moment as the warring nobles of the Shang dynasty were cheerfully eliminating species, they were also developing a zoomorphic art of much refinement, proof of the enduring Chinese view that there is not merely a correspondence but an actual continuum between man and nature. One must also note that plant species were on the whole immune from this decimation, since cereals and other plant items as objects of sacrifice did not yet occupy the place of importance which they would have in the Han dynasty. Speaking generally, the object of these practices was as much to annihilate the sacrifice as to eat it orgiastically.

Then, during the Chou dynasty, opinion turned against these gross acts of "conspicuous consumption". At the same time as Greek thinkers were turning away from traditional ritual and ancestral conceptions of the universe, and towards new beliefs-öof measure and moderation, so something of the same kind was happening in central China. When later writers look back at the Shang dynasty, and especially

from the vantage-point of the cultured Han civilization, they view the wholesale and violent annihilations inflicted by the nobles of the Shang, with a distaste bordering on horror. It is true that the repulsion is specifically targeted on the vice of drunkenness, but we may justifiably take their enlightened attitude as extending to the environment as a whole, since Chinese thought preferred to fuse the elements of the natural universe rather than separate them analytically. And so moral authority gradually passes from the royal courts to the lawmakers and reformers and philosophers. For the first time in Chinese history, there exists a feeling, a consciousness, that the bounties of nature are not perhaps inexhaustible.

This novel and chastened attitude towards the physical environment is reflected in a change of official practice. No longer does the ancestral sacrifice depend for its merit on the volume of animals sacrificed; instead, a strict quota is imposed on the number permitted, and this is officially endorsed in the Book of Rites. The hecatomb becomes, in the true sense, a dead letter. In the same way, new rules of a "close season" in effect are laid down for hunting, and restrictions are imposed, it is very interesting to note, on the felling of trees. The eventual substitution of cereal cultivation for mass hunting guarantees a new and more moral way of looking at the environment, supported perhaps by the greater self-discipline needed to ensure a good annual crop. Most striking of all, in the period immediately preceding Confucius, the old forms of war are superseded by a curious kind of courtly combat the object of which is not slaughter but assertion of superior status, and which is subject to strict rules of fair play and severe limits on the use of brute violence. It is not exaggerated to see in all this an evolution of what one may call a biopolitical consciousness.

To the question, therefore, whether one can justify a secondary place for the study of "environmental consciousness before the 20th century" in a curriculum of biosphere studies, it was thus possible to give a cautiously affirmative answer.

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