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Religion and ecological crisis: responses from Asia

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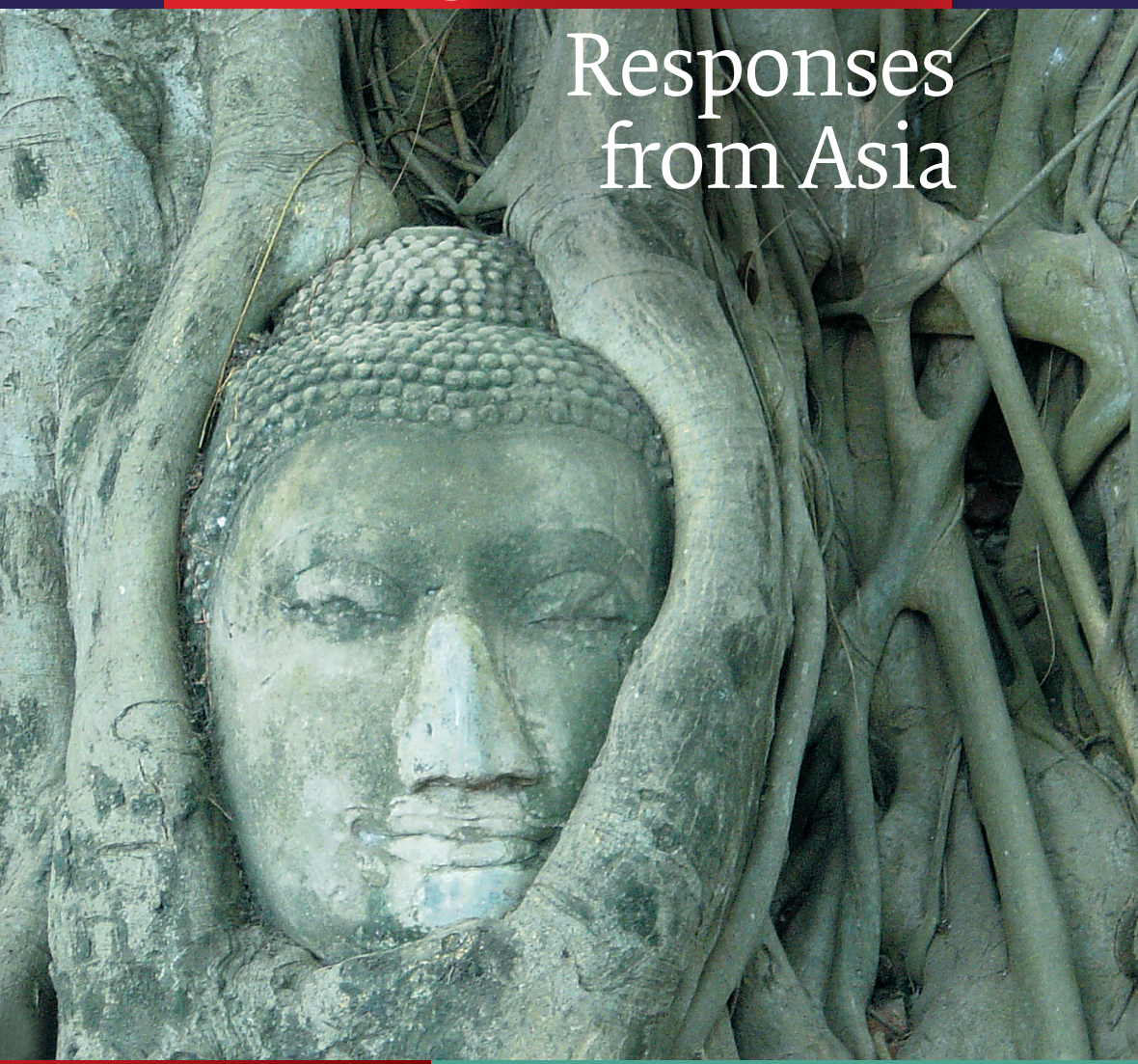

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Religion and Ecological Crisis

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Leiden University Press

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INTRODUCTION

Religion and Ecological Crisis: Responses from Asia

Mette Halskov Hansen and Kenneth Bo Nielsen

Abstract

In this introductory chapter, we situate the book and its case studies from Taiwan, China, India, and Vietnam in the wider literature on spiritual ecology, global sustainability, transcendence, and grassroots environmental movements in the Asian context. We identify conjuncture, future-orientation, and dynamics between self and collective as three specific interlocking dimensions in the spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives that the book is concerned with. A focus on these dimensions, we argue, can reveal specificities, commonalities, and variations within a highly diverse field of spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives that operate in very different cultural and political contexts.

Keywords: Environmentalism; spiritual ecology; environmental movements; transcendence; sustainability

A decade ago, the historian Prasenjit Duara wrote:

> [T]he greatest obstacles facing the elevation of sustainability to a transcendent level are the untrammeled power of capitalist consumption and the imperative felt by national populaces and their leaders to avoid sacrificing national interests at all—or perhaps, almost all, costs. (Duara 2014, 28)

To Duara, any substantial move towards planetary sustainability would require "grass-roots activists and leaders who comprehend the necessity of transcending the limits of interests and place while pursuing ways to respond to local problems" (2014, 50).

The research leading to the nine chapters in this book has emerged in response to such calls for greater attention to the potentially powerful interconnections between global sustainability, transcendence, and grassroots activists and movements. At the heart of the book is the question of how practices of religion and spirituality motivate and engage individuals, groups, and organizations in environmental activities and transformations in ways that science and conventional

politics do not; for instance, by adopting and experimenting with more sustainable ways of living, by practicing locally attuned ecoagriculture, or by actively promoting waste-recycling, thereby cultivating environmental values and awareness through practical engagement. The book is the collective result of several years of collaboration in a research project that has explored practices and impacts of religious and spiritually inspired environmental forms of agency in China, Taiwan, India, and Vietnam. We are interested in the complexities, potentials, and pitfalls of environmental grassroots activities in a part of the world where many people are hard hit by the effects of climate change and long-term pollution, and where local temples or other forms of spiritual communities form an integrated part of everyday life. All our case studies concern people, communities, or organizations who respond to local manifestations of ecological crises by engaging non-worldly powers transcending the limits of sectional interests and the particularities of place.

In the following, we start out by situating our research in the context of a wider literature on the connections between transcendence and the ecological crisis. We then briefly describe our main methodological approaches, including a short discussion of how we critically engage with the notion of "spiritual ecology" as a framework for our case studies. Finally, we identify and analyze what we see as three interlocking dimensions that are particularly relevant for understanding similarities, differences, and variations between our studied cases of spiritual ecology, namely "conjuncture," "future-orientation," and "dynamics between self and collective.".

Religion, Transcendence, and the Global Ecological Crisis

In *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, Duara (2014) argues that the world has failed to effectively adopt a shared response to climate change and environmental degradation because humanity has become increasingly alienated from transcendent ideas and universal principles found in religions, philosophies, and political ideologies. This alienation, Duara asserts, has in effect eroded the foundations for arriving at more widely shared and effective ways of dealing with an accelerating crisis that is truly global in scope, and which confronts humanity as a whole, though in different ways. As the effects of environmental destruction, an irretrievable loss of biodiversity, and the ravages caused by climate change are increasingly felt everywhere, the very physical salvation of the planet both should and could become *the* shared transcendent goal of our times, he argues.

Duara's emphasis on the transcendent, and on transcendental ideas and values, as a possible global environmental resource is significant. He refers to a way of human knowing that draws on non-worldly moral authority to challenge

existing conditions. It involves rational, mystical, and practical knowledge and behavior, designed and aimed "to affect and often change the self and the world"; but, crucially, to qualify as transcendent, it must rise above national sovereignty and sectional interests. In other words, non-worldly moral authority ceases to be truly transcendent when it is appropriated by existing worldly powers and used to exclude others (Duara 2014, 5).

Defying the all too obvious risk of essentializing and orientalizing Asia and mythologizing premodern philosophies, Duara insists that it should be of particular importance for scholars and activists engaged in environmental questions to look to Asia for evidence of (and inspiration from) spiritual and religious environmental initiatives rooted in transcendental ideas and values that may be able to support and accelerate global efforts towards sustainability. On the one hand, this is a counter-intuitive proposition insofar as Asia is not only possibly the world's most heavily polluted continent, but also home to some of the fastest growing economies that are powered by "the untrammeled power of capitalist consumption," to use Duara's own phrase (Duara 2014, 28). On the other hand, Duara identifies philosophical traditions and religions that have developed in Asia as examples and repositories of non-exclusive dialogical forms of transcendence that may have global relevance. Anyone who visits temples in China, Taiwan, or Vietnam, for example, will notice how deities, spiritual beings, and deified humans associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and local folk religions may be hosted side by side. Each of them constitutes a form of non-worldly transcendent moral authority in their own right, but all are part of a cosmology that conveniently allows for a dialogical relationship between them, and therefore also for worshippers to access and communicate with any of them at any time. Such qualities will also be familiar to visitors to Hindu temples in South Asia and beyond.

In making these arguments about the potential of shared and dialogical transcendent values, Duara is of course not alone. Other scholars, most notably Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, have also for some time argued that religious-philosophical traditions—not only in Asia but also elsewhere—contain an untapped global potential for motivating people to explore new and more sustainable ways of living. Their edited ten-volume book series titled *Religions of the World and Ecology* on the ecological implications of the doctrines and rituals of, among others, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism analyzes at length what these beliefs, philosophies, and religions might be able to offer a world marred by ecological crisis and environmental destruction. Tucker and Grim's starting point is that "while in the past none of the religions of the world have had to face an environmental crisis such as we are now confronting, they remain key instruments in shaping attitudes towards nature" (Tucker and Grim 1998, xvii). They argue that there are many commonalities between the perspectives of different religions on

ecology, for instance that the natural world has intrinsic value, and that greed and destructive behavior should be morally condemned (Tucker and Grim 2014, 12).

Like Duara, Tucker and Grim take an explicitly normative approach when they argue for the universal need to promote shared values and ethics of nature and planetary health, and for the positive role that religions can—but not necessarily do—play in terms of rethinking theologies and reorienting practices in more environmentally attuned ways. Their introductions to each of the ten volumes on religions and ecology explicitly caution against "unqualified optimism" when it comes to assessing the potential of religions to be drivers of broad-based progressive environmental and ecological transformations. They point to the familiar and inevitable gaps, discrepancies, and contradictions that always arise between religious doctrines and teachings, and actual practices (Tucker and Grim 1998, xx; see also e.g., Grim and Tucker 2014; Gottlieb 2006; Miller 2017).

Buddhism is an illustrative case in point. In popular discourse and imagination, Buddhism has often been presented and interpreted as an inherently "eco-friendly" religion that stresses interconnectedness, moderation, and respect for the cycles and balance of nature. Buddhism and Buddhist institutions, however, have been very active drivers of agricultural expansion and the introduction of commercial crops and commodities, effecting massive changes to landscapes and environments throughout Asian history (Elverskog 2020). There may thus be nothing intrinsically "ecological" about Buddhism per se. Nonetheless, in the course of the last one hundred years or so, many Buddhist leaders and practitioners have radically changed their approach to and way of thinking about environmental and ecological questions, eventually producing a new architecture of Buddhism—one that is, in fact, deeply concerned with the environment (Elverskog 2020, 119). This transformation has been important for raising environmental awareness and motivating people into action, something which several contemporary studies of Buddhist ecological practices confirm (for example, Darlington 2012, 2019; Lee and Han 2015; and in this volume: Lu Rots; Chen and Li; and Wellens and Hansen).

Modern environmentalist articulations of Hinduism provide another illustrative case of the complexities and possible contradictions inherent in the relationship between religion, spirituality, and ecology. As Haberman (2006) shows in his work on India's heavily polluted Yamuna River that is worshipped by Hindus as a goddess, Hindu theology may, on the one hand, function to inhibit or even resist environmental concerns and restorative action. Within one line of theological reasoning, the river Yamuna is viewed in a highly transcendent fashion as a river goddess so powerful and inherently pure that neither she, nor any living being that depends on her, can in fact ever be polluted. On the other hand, other theological interpretations can, in contrast, pave the way for more proactive environmentalist engagements: some worshippers maintain that heavy pollution does not affect the

river goddess herself who remains pure and unpolluted, but they will also acknowledge that the polluted water does indeed harm living beings and that action, or at the very least carefulness, is needed. Others yet may recognize that pollution can have harmful effects *both* on the beings who come in contact with the water, *and* on the river goddess herself. To them, the Yamuna River remains a "divine mother" but is recast as a vulnerable and ailing being increasingly in need of human care and protection. As such, Hindu theology, like many other theologies, can work in multiple ways, prompting a range of possible responses to local environmental pollution, from passivity and inaction to proactive environmentalism (see also Drew 2017).

Other studies from the Indian context serve to highlight the crucial role of the wider social and political context in shaping current articulations of religion and environmentalism. As several scholars have demonstrated, discourses and understandings of nature as divine and sacred rooted in Hindu theology may be effective in mobilizing broader constituencies behind environmental engagement and care; but, by advancing a form of "Hindu" religious environmentalism, such movements always risk playing into the hands of India's xenophobic and chauvinist Hindu right that seeks to transform (oftentimes violently) India into an exclusively Hindu nation in which non-Hindu minorities have no place (Mawdsley 2002, 2006; Sharma 2014; Tomalin 2016)—a decidedly un-transcendental orientation, in Duara's terms.

The actual capacity for religions to play an effective role in environmental and ecological transformation—whether locally or at higher levels of scale—thus cannot be deduced in any straightforward way from religious doctrine or ritual. It inheres in the practitioners' interpretations of doctrines, and in people's reflections and choices regarding how to put them into practice, individually or with others. And, as several of the chapters in this volume also demonstrate, it is conditioned by the wider social and political context and depends particularly on the political space available to religious groups who engage in environmental action locally. This, as we return to below, underscores the need for moving the study of religion, transcendence, and environmentalism beyond the confines of textual and doctrinal analysis, and into the domain of social practice and political context—an approach that the contributions to this volume adhere to.

Tucker and Grim clearly do not conceive of religion as a singular or even straightforward answer to the current environmental and ecological crisis. But they do suggest that since both ecological scientists and many religious practitioners today share a deep and genuine concern for our planetary future and recognize the urgent need for societies to change and act accordingly, they might be able to supplement each other in powerful ways. This insistence on a productive and strengthened convergence between the "ways of knowing" of the environmental and ecological sciences on the one hand, and religious institutions and practitioners on the other, is strikingly evident in many of the cases from Asia that we present in

the chapters of this book. Most of the religious or spiritual groups we have studied find inspiration in, or base their own arguments on, scientific knowledge about the environmental destruction of the planet. They recognize the necessity and capacity of science for supporting and driving the development towards more sustainable practices. "Science" matters in an affirmative and often productive way to many of the spiritually and religiously inspired environmental initiatives and movements that this book is concerned with. It constitutes an authority of a different kind than the non-worldly authority that inspires such groups' own environmental and ecological forms of action. The relationship between science and religion, then, is rarely understood as a zero-sum "authority game."

Interestingly, where the ecological anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel (2020, 1) in his introduction to a special issue on religious environmental activism in Asia criticizes "most secular approaches" for only treating "specific superficial symptoms" of the current environmental and ecological crisis, the spiritual and religious activists that appear in the case studies in this book are rarely as dismissive of science. Indeed, such a dualistic understanding that reduces science (alongside other "secular approaches") to a sphere that deals only with surface symptoms and contrasts it with an equally reductionist sphere of spirituality that more substantially engages with the deeper and more transcendent spiritual and moral roots of our current crisis, is much less pronounced among the leaders and grassroots activists in our case studies than what Sponsel's argument would lead us to expect. Most of our protagonists would agree with Sponsel that the current planetary crisis cannot be solved through technical fixes or science alone, and they call instead for radical changes to worldviews, values, and behaviors. However, it is the holistic orientation of their approach—and not the dualistic separation of the secular and the spiritual, or the scientific and the transcendental-ethical—that stands out as foundational to their work and efforts.

Methodology, Approach, and Conceptualization

The research presented in this book mainly investigates practices, forms of activism, and ways of organizing from an emic perspective, that is, by starting from people's own ways of interpretating spiritual traditions, or working with religious doctrines, teachings, or texts. In other words, we do not engage in any substantial analysis of the doctrines or classics of the traditions that appear in the chapters in this book, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Sikhism, relying instead on the work of other scholars in the field. Many studies on "religion and ecology" in Asia, including those in the series edited by Tucker and Grim mentioned above, are first and foremost based on the analysis and interpretations of texts and doctrines.

They provide invaluable insights into the ways in which different religions and philosophies perceive of the relations between humans, other living beings, the planet, and the wider world beyond. However, the concerns that lie at the heart of this book are how religion, spirituality and transcendent ideas and values infuse daily environmental practices, and to what extent they motivate people to environmental action.

The nine chapters cover both larger established religious institutions and local spiritually inspired collectives and initiatives. We follow Roger S. Gottlieb's (2006, viii) conceptualization of religion as a system of belief, ritual, and institutional life; and spirituality as constituting a certain way of being religious. Spirituality is a kind of religiosity that accentuates moral values, self-cultivation, and personal experience, and is characterized by theological tolerance rather than attachment to one established religious normality or institution (2006, ix). We intentionally adhere to such an open conceptualization of spirituality, agreeing with Peter van der Veer (2009, 5) that it is this very vagueness that makes the concept of spirituality so productive—standing out as something opposed to materiality, distinctive from the body, and distinctive from, but not necessarily opposed to, organized and institutionalized religions.

Most of our fieldwork and other forms of data production were carried out in India, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam in the period from early 2021 to late 2024, allowing us to juxtapose and situate our diverse cases within the same global context characterized by circulating discourses on sustainable development goals, robust yet politically disputed scientific knowledge about the effects of climate change and environmental destruction, and highly contentious political and popular debates about possible solutions and ways forward. However, each of our cases also accentuates how local, regional, and national political, social, and cultural contexts impact, and sometimes define, how spiritually inspired environmental activities and movements are designed, organized, and put into practice. For example, some groups and movements are driven by the need to confront aggressive capital interests that encroach on and appropriate local natural resources, thereby threatening local livelihoods or destroying landscapes that may hold profound cultural or spiritual value. Others, in contrast, may need to carefully balance the invocation of religious beliefs in their environmental activities in order not to provoke a coercive response from an authoritarian state apparatus, which may jeopardize their very organizational existence and cause harm to local populations.

Despite significant differences between the cultural and political contexts in which the environmental and ecological activities analyzed in the book are embedded, the religious-spiritual collectivities and institutions that are the focal points of the individual chapters share several key characteristics across contexts. They contain elements of ritual, ideas of awakening, a sense of a transcendent and

larger purpose, a moral code. Sometimes, they have a charismatic leader who helps to attract new followers or supporters. Equally important, they all exemplify how religious and spiritual institutions and movements may become repositories and resources of ways of knowing and acting on the world that supplement—and in some instances also offer alternatives to—scientific and secular forms of reasoning. This happens in fields as diverse as health, agriculture, food, consumption, and waste recycling. Not least, many of our cases illustrate a "non-materialist" worldview in the sense that they (more or less consciously) challenge—and sometimes reject outright—values and practices of growth, extraction, consumption and competition. In contrast, they argue for shared and transcending values of nature and the natural environment, based on which an individual may cultivate alternatives that can transform ways of being in the world and build individual and collective environmental awareness. The prevalent orientation that emerges from the case studies is one of seeking out new and creative fusions between different ways of knowing and acting on the world, working towards the shared goal of creating more sustainable futures through action in the present.

Spiritual Ecology

The cases we present in these chapters may be considered forms of "spiritual ecology." Sponsel (2020,1) deploys this term to denote a "vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with nature, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms." Echoing earlier scholarship on social interfaces as particularly significant sites of contested knowledge production and social action involving differentially positioned actors (e.g., Arce and Long 2000; Long 2000), Sponsel's formulation is suggestive insofar as it stresses how spiritually, religiously, or transcendentally anchored ecological movements and initiatives do not emerge from some pure, pristine spiritual space uncontaminated by wider historical, social, and political dynamics. Rather, such movements and initiatives are always dynamically shaped by the multiple forces—historical, social, and political—that constitute the contexts from within which they emerge.

Sponsel's notion of spiritual ecology is imbued with a great deal of flexibility that productively allows it to be deployed analytically in a wide array of contexts. However, due to its generic nature it also underspecifies how "the arena" of spiritual ecology is constituted, and it remains relatively silent on the question of how "the intellectual and practical activities" that unfold on this arena may be conditioned by the specific context in which they emerge. Based on the case studies in this book, and drawing theoretical inspiration from recent advances in

the study of "aspirations" in agrarian transformation, in particular by Bennike et al. (2020), we identify three specific interlocking dimensions of spiritual ecology and spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives in the Asian context: *conjuncture, future-orientation, and dynamics between self and collective*.

First, we argue that activities in the arena of spiritual ecology are crucially shaped by the specific conjuncture at which they emerge, that is, by historically produced conditions of possibility. Spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives are inherently part of wider ethical and normative worlds with strong transcendental contents, but they are also always circumscribed by the material conditions in which people live, and by wider political opportunity structures. Secondly, as initiatives that variously work to change the way we live, eat, produce, think, imagine, and act on our shared planet, they invoke an "ethics of possibility" (Appadurai 2013; Copeland 2023), an active orientation towards the future in ways that oscillate between anticipatory and transformative engagements. Lastly, as individual and collective efforts "to affect and often change the self and the world" (Duara 2014, 5), they involve "active negotiations and reconfigurations of the relationship between subject and collective" (Bennike et al. 2020, 7). When examined together, conjuncture, future-orientation, and the dynamics between self and collective reveal "the spatio-temporal specificity" (Bennike et al. 2020, 7) and variation of the spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives covered in this book.

Conjuncture

Structural constraints shape not only what spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives can do and achieve, but also their imaginaries. They are informed by specific historical processes and by wider ethical and normative horizons, as well as shaped by political and economic processes that make up the conditions of possibility under which spiritually and religiously inspired initiatives can materialize into social action for ecological change. While conjunctural specificities are unpacked in each of the chapters, we find two broader, global processes that register more or less forcefully across conjunctures, namely (1) the strong endorsement of environmental agendas by all the major and very many minor religious traditions; and (2) the growing political legitimacy of environmental discourse (if not always practice) across regime types. The former—often referred to as "the greening of religion"—has created new spaces within religious institutions and communities for articulating and acting on environmental and ecological issues "in the name of religion." The latter—visible, for example, in the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015 by all UN member states—creates new legitimate political spaces for raising environmental problems in the public

sphere, albeit to very varying degrees. Indeed, across the countries covered by the nine articles in this book, we find that variations in historically produced political contexts matter significantly in shaping the conditions of possibility for spiritual or religiously inspired ecological initiatives.

At one end of the spectrum, we encounter one of Asia's best functioning democracies with a vibrant civil society, Taiwan, which provides a rare space where religious and spiritual environmental initiatives can unfold relatively unpoliced by the state, as shown in Wellens and Hansen's study of the locally embedded environmentalism centered on local temples dedicated to Shennong, the Divine Farmer. At the other end, we find the despondent situation among the Blang village communities in southwestern China, as analyzed by Bäckström. Not only has the incursion and consolidation of the Chinese state over many decades caused unprecedented ecological and agricultural destruction, but its strong modernizing and centralizing thrust has also deprived the Blang of many of the ethical and spiritual resources that used to regulate their relationships with their environment. This has left them in a situation where they struggle to define and navigate a looming crisis in meaningful ways.

In other settings, however, we find that the political context can matter for spiritual or religiously inspired movements and initiatives in more contradictory and less clear-cut ways. In India, the consolidation of an authoritarian-populist form of Hindu nationalism that sees India as first and foremost a Hindu nation is, for example, highly conducive to certain forms of ecological and environmental mobilization, such as the guru-led campaigns for agricultural environmentalism and alternative forms of agroecology that draw on a longer South Asian tradition of guru-based spirituality and leadership, as analyzed by Münster (see also Ranjan 2024). This ascendant Hindu nationalism that now increasingly informs popular common sense in much of India is similarly a crucial enabler of a more dispersed movement of Indian middle-class and elite consumer preferences towards the ostensibly healthier and more nutritious milk produced by India's iconic "holy cows." This is a niche product that, as Baviskar shows, would scarcely have become so popular had it not been for the working of a distinctly Hindu nationalist cultural politics over a longer time span. In contrast, the anti-minority discourse and politics of Hindu nationalism means that "non-Hindu" forms of religious or spiritual environmentalism must work in an increasingly shrinking space where they need to tread very carefully, as Nielsen and Gokhale's analysis of the environmental engagements of the Catholic Church in Goa shows. For the ecologically minded Sikhs in north India, studied by Kvanneid, the political context works in openly contradictory ways. While the organization EcoSikh can claim legitimacy by working with, and within, a religious tradition with "Indian roots and origins," their espousal of Sikhi ideas and values—however eclectic and subdued—also works to

establish them as a group with a distinct religious profile that sets them apart from mainstream Hinduism.

In the ostensibly secular People's Republic of China (PRC), the Sunshine Ecovillage that draws on interpretations of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions, has, as Qian, Liu, and Svarverud show, largely sought to interpret religious and spiritual texts and messages in a secular language to avoid conflicts with the state and state ideology. In line with Communist Party discourse, they interpret philosophical texts and religious doctrines as cultural reflections of a Chinese glorious past, and they often connect them directly to current national ideology and policy. The Taiwanese Tzu Chi Buddhist environmental organization, studied by Chen and Li, deploys strikingly similar strategies when operating in the PRC, navigating a monitored space by downplaying the religious elements of their environmentalism, instead actively aligning their activities with state programs, and highlighting the positive impact on local communities (see also Lee and Ling 2015; Weller et al. 2017). A similar dynamic is evident in Vietnam, where the Hòa Hảo Buddhist religious movement has experienced a significant revival after having been organizationally abolished by the Communist regime for decades. Vietnam's many new environmental laws and policies, Lu Rots shows, have created new opportunities for Hòa Hảo organizations and followers to actively engage with state-led environmental programs, enabling them to considerably expand their footprint, build up the organization's social presence, and gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of the state.

The Future(s)

While all our cases of spiritually and religiously inspired movements and initiatives work in a historically and politically conditioned *present*, they also have a strong orientation towards the *future*. Although the future is uncertain and managing uncertainty is one major raison d'être for religions and spirituality, people and institutions relate to and engage with that future in very varied ways, depending on how they interpret it and what they expect from it. To some, the future may appear as relatively inevitable and a given, leading to ecological practices of a more anticipatory nature. To others, the future may appear malleable and subject to the influence of human and divine agency, including the agency located in ecological movements and initiatives, opening a space in the present for action of a more transformational kind.

As would be expected, most of the protagonists in our studies envision a future where they themselves play an active part in formulating or enacting alternative ways of thinking or living as compared to the present. Imaginings of a better and more sustainable future are created and pursued through the activities of

individuals and organizations that aim to address problems experienced in the present. Many are especially concerned with the risks associated with the production and consumption of food, seeking a break with industrialized food production, and promoting initiatives that they believe will improve bodily and ecological health. For instance, the Catholic priests and the local village-level farmers' club in Goa (Nielsen and Gokhale), seek to reinvent older forms of community agriculture as a means of charting a greener, more sustainable future for a state reeling under the ecologically destructive pressures of mass tourism, real estate development, and extractivism. The Zero Budget Spiritual Farming techniques promoted in India by Subhash Palekar (Münster) aim for a mode of agricultural production that is fully decoupled from chemicalization and the use of pesticides, insisting that only Indian philosophy can provide the perfect blend of science and spirituality required to bring about this future transformation. Although operating on a much smaller scale, the activists in the Sunshine Ecovillage in the mountains of Eastern China also try to reinvent past forms of agriculture without the use of pesticides. Drawing on Daoist classics, they integrate their own interpretation of the "natural" with sciences of regenerative agriculture, thus outlining a future path towards safe food production and holistic self-cultivation (Qian, Liu and Svarverud). Similarly, the activities of EcoSikh (Kvanneid) promote organic and natively grown food and awareness-raising, coupled with small-scale reforestation projects to create a future green and healthy Punjab, offering a possible way forward for a state that is currently living through the worst effects on ecologies and bodies of decades of intensively chemicalized agricultural development. The vegetarian turn among Tzu Chi volunteers (Chen and Li) stems from a comparable vision of simultaneously producing healthier bodies and a future healthy planet: "Protecting life and the environment starts at the dining temple," as one of the international Tzu Chi branches proclaims (Tzu Chi Canada n.d.). Health-conscious elite Indian consumers can also be seen to start at the dining table, opting for particular brands of milk. Their motivation largely springs from concerns about individual and bodily health—prevalent among many members of the middle classes especially (e.g., Agrawal and Gupta 2018; Kennedy et al. 2019)—and their changing patterns of milk consumption have little positive impact on ecological relations more widely (Baviskar). But they do at least implicitly raise larger issues about the future of human, animal and planetary health rooted in latent concerns about industrialized food production and animal welfare.

The environmentally oriented activities in the Shennong temples in Taiwan (Wellens and Hansen) are also strongly centered on questions of personal and bodily health, invoking and adapting the historical legacy of the Divine Farmer to safeguard the lives, health, and livelihoods of both present and future generations. Threats to the natural environment are perceived not only as being directly

harmful for those living in the present, but also, due to the moral duties associated with filial piety, as a potential threat to future generations and the very continuation of people's lineage. This gives the temples' ecological action in the present, however limited, a clear future-orientation that may lead to wider environmental awakening among the people who seek help from the Divine Farmer. Similarly, for followers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in Vietnam (Lu Rots), the cultivation of individual sustainable practices in the present is also firmly fixed on the future. It is not just a means for creating a more collective sustainable future society, but first of all a way of achieving a future rebirth in the Pure Land for the individual, in line with Hòa Hảo philosophy and beliefs.

In this larger picture, Bäckström's study among the Blang in southwestern China constitutes an outlier. The Blang recognize that their land and the soil is "ill" because of the exaggerated use of fertilizers and agrochemicals, and they are greatly concerned about declining health due to food additives. They also envision solutions that are grounded in past practices of swidden/shifting cultivation, but due to the Chinese state's firm prohibition of these practices they find themselves unable to recuperate collective spaces and symbolic resources for action and organization, complicating even an anticipatory engagement with the future. In all the other cases, however, the future appears as malleable and is engaged in transformative ways, even if the temporal and imaginative horizons of the engagements vary with context. All the initiatives and movements that are analyzed simultaneously mix considerations of what is desirable with considerations of what is viable. Indeed, none of the movements covered in this book are engaged in revolutionary initiatives that explicitly seek the overthrow of existing political-economic orders. They are rather, as Kvanneid (this volume) puts it, primarily characterized by an element of pragmatism, rooted in an unsentimental assessment of the conditions of possibility that prevail in the present.

Self and Collective

Projects and organizations imagining more sustainable ecological futures are necessarily implicated in negotiations over the meaning of self and collectivity. Although people may come together in smaller or larger spiritual or religious collectivities to pursue shared ecological or environmental projects, there is always a potential tension between individual and collective aspirations, desires, and hopes. Moreover, as several of our cases demonstrate, the pursuit of shared ecological or environmental projects may in itself alter the meaning and form of existing spiritual or religious collectivities, their institutional arrangements, and the position of individuals within them.

In several cases of institutionalized religions, we find that for most people, joining the organizations in the first place was largely unrelated to any specific desire to become an environmental activist. Tzu Chi is a long-established international Buddhist organization with an outward-looking philosophy of promoting a more just and sustainable world through volunteer contributions to charity and practices of material frugality (Chen and Li this volume; Weller et al. 2017; Huang 2009). But they also emphasize that the path to solving the ecological crises is through practices of loving oneself, others, and the environment. By contributing to collective activities that are expected to lead to a better future, each individual also gains merit, which is an important motivational factor. Merit is also at the heart of many of the activities undertaken by followers of the millennial Hòa Hảo organization in Vietnam. This pursuit of individual merit, however, is sometimes difficult to align with the organization's environmentalist ambitions. As Lu Rots shows, the organization's goal of reducing the use of single-use plastics and plastic waste in society is routinely undermined by other merit-generating organizational activities such as hosting large, generous celebrations in connection with temple activities—celebrations that invariably produce very large amounts of unrecycled plastic in the form of discarded single-use cups and containers. A related but more inward-looking approach to the transformation of the self as a means to generate larger changes is found in the Indian Zero Budget Natural Farming movement (Münster), whose guru-like leader Palekar argues that a simple and natural lifestyle must be achieved through yogic practices, producing an inner transformation of the self.

The fact that people are often drawn into the environmental activities of religious or spiritual groups for a multitude of different and sometimes self-interested reasons—and quite possibly with limited environmentalist content—does not necessarily render their environmental engagements any less significant. In the case of the Sunshine Ecovillage in China (Qian, Liu and Svarverud), for example, people seem to primarily come to escape intensely felt social pressures and expectations that they find it impossible to meet or adapt to. In the case of the Divine Farmer in Taiwan (Wellens and Hansen), many people who first and foremost adhere and pray to him for his medicinal powers, have eventually also come to appreciate the way that the Divine Farmer is now also enlisted to promote issues of soil health and sustainable food production. Several chapters emphasize that religious and spiritual institutions may see value in engaging in environmental activities partly because it helps them maintain or regain relevance and legitimacy in a local or national context (Lu Rots; Nielsen and Gokhale; Wellens and Hansen); but this should not be taken to mean that their efforts are less "authentic" or less important for local environments, individual participants, and communities, or for charting greener futures more generally.

We do, however, also find that some religious organizations make concerted efforts to include new groups and individuals within the ambit of their

environmental initiatives, thereby expanding the meaning of community beyond conventional religious boundaries. In Goa, the active repurposing of the Catholic Church in a greener environmentalist direction (Nielsen and Gokhale) has made it more directly relevant to a broader group of Goans from across communities who share a concern with acutely felt environmental problems. Similarly, the Eco-Sikh movement (Kvanneid) works to reinterpret Sikh teachings and philosophy and to create new practices in ways that appeal to people beyond the Sikh community who are equally concerned with the ecological crisis.

The chapters also offer illustrations of strongly felt individual environmental and health anxieties that struggle to articulate with established or emerging collectivities. The Blang (Bäckström) experience is that their long-established community, its spirits, gods, forests, and lands are severely challenged by ecological degradation; but the space for collective action to generate the profound changes they see as necessary is so limited by the policies of the Chinese state that they can only pragmatically seek to adapt rather than pursue collective action. In one of the cases from India (Baviskar), the shifting milk preferences of some elite Indian consumers can arguably be said to constitute a loose "movement" of sorts, but it remains closely tied to individual health concerns and individual choice, lacking the kind of collective organizational component that might have enabled it to mount, for example, a stronger critique of the violence and wider ecological consequences of industrial dairying.

Conclusion

There are considerable differences between the communities and institutions that we have studied and critically situated within the broadly defined "arena" of spiritual ecology. Some of them play an important role in generating awareness of the global climate and environmental crisis, or in experimenting with alternative and more sustainable forms of agriculture, food production, and consumption. Some actively or indirectly help people to deal with individual climate anxiety and fears about what the future may hold. Many create images of a possible future that entails a "good and meaningful life," offering alternative ways of being in the world that challenge the drive towards limitless economic growth and increasing material consumption that often take center stage in political debates and policy making.

The cases we discuss in the book are examples of "spiritual ecology activities" that function and operate within the temporal and spatial specificities of conjuncture and context. The various actors and activists we present largely accept the existence of structural constraints, and do not challenge the basic political set-up of their societies. Indeed, there are no immediate ecological revolutions on the

horizon for any of the communities we have studied. However, some do already play an important role as agents of environmental transformations, whether on a limited local scale or as part of larger and more widespread communities of spiritual ecology. Based in locally grounded beliefs, and often actively seeking to expand existing communities, they are able to motivate people to turn their attention towards collective environmental engagement. Some of them manage to explore pathways towards a more ecologically and socially sustainable future that take the cosmologies, beliefs, values, and interests of local communities and people seriously, and in ways that international interventions or secular NGOs are not always able to. One of the conclusions that one may draw from the otherwise very diverse case studies is that spiritual ecology has an impact on individuals, communities, and sometimes on ecological practices, especially when it comes in the form of organized, locally grounded collective initiatives; and, not least, when it has visions that are recognizable and meaningful for people and serve both collective and individual purposes.

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CHAPTER 1

Enlisting the Divine Farmer, Shennong: Spirituality, Science, and Environmentalism in Taiwan

Koen Wellens and Mette Halskov Hansen

Abstract

Taiwan may well be the country in East Asia with the highest concentration of both religious groups and environmental organizations. Some religious organizations are expanding and redirecting their traditional focus on human centred salvation towards a universal transcendent goal of protecting and saving the planet. We take the worship of Shennong, the Divine Farmer, as an example. We show how one Divine Farmer temple has creatively sought to realign the spiritual powers of the Divine Farmer to address new challenges in people's relationship to nature. We discuss how religious institutions seek to mobilise people for the environmental cause responding actively to society's call for action and thereby simultaneously strengthening, or even re-establishing, their own social and emotional relevance.

Keywords: Popular religion; Emperor Yan; environmental activism

Introduction

> At this moment, everyone needs to wake up and take action, and return to the earliest era when humans coexisted harmoniously with nature and ecology. That was the era of the Divine Farmer! (Chairperson of the Qingyun Temple Committee in Ruifang, Taiwan; Huang 2020).

There are several reasons why Taiwan constitutes a very relevant case for studying how environmental concerns are increasingly taken on board by religious organizations, not only at the discursive level but in day-to-day activities.[1] First of all, with a modern history of breakneck industrial development resulting in a per capita GDP ranking of seventeenth in the world in 2023 (Ventura 2024), Taiwan has been facing widespread environmental degradation. Many of Taiwan's 23.5 million inhabitants have been living with severe air and water pollution for decades and experienced more frequently occurring extreme weather such as droughts as well

as increasingly stronger and ever more frequent typhoons. Second, Taiwan has one of the most well-functioning democracies in Asia, with a very active civil society that does not hold back when it has grievances over environmental issues. Added to this, the country has a high level of religious pluralism that creates a fertile ground for religions and spiritual movements to keep developing in order to stay relevant in modern society. Third, Taiwan's precarious sovereignty status makes its government institutions eager to support Taiwanese religious institutions in "going global" and making Taiwan more visible and relevant to the world. Finally, we can observe that the Chinese Communist Party since the 1980s has allowed several Taiwanese religious organizations to establish themselves in China and, in addition to acting as traditional charities, to conduct certain social activities such as environmental education and organized recycling. Taken together, this has provided a window for environmentally conscious Taiwanese religions to influence and sensitize a larger population beyond the island. In this chapter, we explore how community temples may enlist divine beings to help create awareness of key environmental issues and, at the same time, enhance the temple's own visibility and relevance.

Several studies have already shown how larger Taiwanese Buddhist organizations have turned their focus toward environmental issues, not only in Taiwan but also in branches in China and other countries.[2] Socially engaged Buddhist organizations have proliferated since the 1990s (Schak and Hsiao 2005), and, most notably, the Buddhist Tzu Chi organization has become well-known in Taiwan, as well as in China and many other countries, for its (sometimes hotly debated) recycling movement and calls for limiting consumption. It frames vegetarianism not merely as an ethical and morally correct practice, but as a contribution to a more sustainable world. And Tzu Chi is not the only Taiwanese Buddhist organization that has focused on environmentalism and taken its teachings to China and beyond. Master Sheng Yen of the Buddhist Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山) has advocated meditation as a way to improve humanity's relationship with nature: "If we want to harmonize with the environment, [we must] first harmonize ourselves," or, expressed in a more Buddhist way: "We must uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth" (提昇人的品質, 建設人間淨土).[3]

Less research has been done on environmentalism in community temples dedicated to traditional Chinese deities that are not part of the larger institutionalized religions. During a longer stay as visiting scholars at the Academia Sinica in 2015, followed by regular short-term stays before and after the pandemic lock-down, we visited and revisited numerous temples in four distinct areas of Taiwan where we interviewed and talked to staff and visitors.[4] We collected a corpus of online and printed publications by or about these temples, interviewed activists during environmental protests in Taipei, and talked to academics engaged in environmental activities in temples. We also consulted with environmental NGOs that have

expressed varying levels of spiritual inspiration or motivation in their work and publications. This article draws on diverse forms of data collected over time in Taiwan and on our combined years of experience researching religious, spiritual, and environmental practices and organizations in China.[5]

The chapter will mainly focus on temples dedicated primarily to the worship of Shennong (神農), directly translated as Divine Farmer or god of agriculture. As with temples dedicated to other traditional Chinese deities, such as the earth god (土地公), they are principally concerned with the well-being of the people living in a more or less clearly defined locality. In recent years, however, we have observed a development in which several temples dedicated to Shennong have expanded their horizons and activities toward addressing larger issues that transcend the local community such as global climate change, soil and air pollution, and loss of biodiversity. This chapter will show how this change came about and, maybe more importantly, how such a shift might contribute to a more culturally rooted and thereby more inclusive model of environmental engagement.

In the following, based on other scholars' research, we first outline the history of Shennong in Chinese and Taiwanese tradition and place the temples dedicated mainly to Shennong in the broader religious landscape of Taiwan. We then turn to a discussion of the reasons behind the changing role of the Divine Farmer in contemporary times, and of the ways in which temples are adjusting and reactivating themselves in the face of the climate and environmental crisis. We suggest that a growing sense of urgency over issues such as changing weather patterns and health concerns due to environmental pollution have triggered spiritual leaders and other actors connected to temples to engage the Divine Farmer in strengthening awareness and spurring to action. We argue that the popular perception of the era of Shennong as a time of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature," and the Divine Farmer's role as the father of agriculture and the use of plants makes him well-suited for grassroots initiatives to redirect religious and spiritual needs toward present-day threats to human well-being, be it through devastating typhoons, life-threatening air pollution, or contaminated soil. But equally important, we find, are the ongoing efforts of Taiwanese urban intellectuals—academics, artists, writers—who seek to address the global environmental crisis by repurposing local religious and spiritual traditions, and in doing so also contribute to the revitalization of Taiwanese culture.

The Divine Farmer in Chinese Tradition

Shennong is also known as the Shennong Emperor (神農大帝) and the Yan Emperor (炎帝 or "Flame Emperor").[6] As with many other deities in Chinese traditional religion, it is assumed that the Divine Farmer is a deity that has developed from

different figures in Chinese mythology and merged into a single entity. Together with the Yellow Emperor, Huang Di, he is considered the most important ancestor of the Chinese people, supposedly having lived several thousand years ago in China's distant and mythical past. Chinese people refer to themselves as "descendants of Yan and Huang" (炎黃子孫; Wugu Xiandi chongjian jinian beizhi). As discussed further below, in his identity as the Yan Emperor, Shennong plays a role in nationalistic discourse today in China as a proud symbol of Chinese identity and ethnic unity. The Divine Farmer, however, is mainly worshipped throughout the Sinitic world, including Taiwan, as a cultural hero, accredited with a long list of inventions and discoveries for the benefit of the Chinese people: He taught the people agriculture, including the use of fire to clear the land, irrigation, ploughing and the domestication of animals; he taught them to drink tea and use other plants, either as food or for medical purposes, how to practice trade, weave cloth and even how to make and play musical instruments.

In his role as the inventor of agriculture he is often called the Ancestral Emperor of the Five Grains (五穀先帝)—hence many temples dedicated to Shennong, especially in Hakka areas, carry the name "Temple of the Five Grains."[7] Through tasting the different plants in nature, Shennong discovered which ones were edible, which ones were poisonous and which ones had medicinal effects. In some of the stories told about him, Shennong was able to do this by having a transparent skin that allowed him to observe the workings of the plants within his own body. When he noticed a plant was having poisonous effects, he quickly ate an antidote to neutralize the poison. In this way he managed to catalogue hundreds of plants according to their potential use for human beings until, eventually, he perished after eating a poisonous plant for which he did not find an antidote in time. It is especially this aspect of self-sacrifice that bestowed the Divine Farmer with the reputation of a selfless savior of humanity who has power over the weather and can assist in healing the sick.[8] As such, his help is traditionally prayed for by farmers needing appropriate weather for their crops or by people who are either sick themselves or have relatives that are sick.

Shennong is depicted either as a saint with a long black beard and imperial attire or as a human-like figure with small horns, pointy ears, a bare chest and dressed only in leaves around his neck and waist and holding a sheaf of grain. In temple statues and paintings, the Shennong dressed in leaves appears in three versions: red-faced, in his role as protector of agriculture (his face being red because he is mostly working outside in the sun); black-faced, representing his medicinal role (his face being black as the result of all the poisonous plants he had to taste); and green-faced in his role of the eliminator of evil and demons. Some temples contain statues of all the versions, some only one. Temples dedicated to Shennong commonly also house statues of other Chinese deities, popular-religious, Daoist or

Buddhist. Because of the close connection between land and agriculture, one of the other deities most likely to be worshipped in a Shennong temple is the territorial earth god (Hsieh 2012).

Shennong is first explicitly mentioned in the fourth and third centuries BCE in polemical texts in which he is associated with the philosophical school of "The Tillers" or Nongjia (農家) (Hsieh 2012; Graham 1979, 104). The Tillers are presented in several of these texts as naïve utopians who want to recreate an "empire of farmers" living in perfect peace with each other and the natural world, in a society where there are no punishments and where even the king must work in the fields (Graham 1979, 67–68). This era in Chinese history, known as the Warring States (475–221 BCE), was a period of great political fragmentation and conflict, but also one with competing philosophical and ideological views of how a well-functioning society could be achieved through implementing the best possible way of ruling it. While we have no surviving texts that can be attributed to the school of The Tillers itself, its ideology associated with the mythical ancient emperor Shennong is revealed in the writings of the other philosophical schools. The Confucians, for instance, criticized the Tiller model for its egalitarianism and lack of hierarchical structuring of society, while Legalist writings acknowledge the value of agricultural wisdom produced by the Tillers but condemn as unworkable a political system without punishment. In a few texts from the Warring States period the "empire of farmers" is upheld as a model by which the practices of current institutions are criticized (Graham 1979, 69).

In the centuries that followed, that is from the later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) onwards, we find more mentions in texts of Shennong's medicinal role as the "taster of the hundred herbs" (Henricks 1998, 107). China's famous first pharmaceutical handbook, the *Shennong Bencaojing* (神農本草經) is attributed to him. It is often translated as Shennong's Herbal Classic and was probably compiled from different oral sources during the late Han. It lists 365 medicinal plants, divided into three categories according to their effect and their treatment for over one hundred diseases (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d., 5). Robert Henricks holds that within historical texts, Shennong came to be first and foremost associated with his contribution to herbal medicine, rather than as the farmer with the five grains (Henricks 1998, 107).

Soon after the Chinese started to settle in Taiwan during the seventeenth century, the first temple dedicated to Shennong was built in Tainan and primarily dedicated to the worship of Shennong as the Medicine King (Hsieh 2012). However, in the following centuries, with more Chinese settlers opening up new land for cultivation, Shennong's role as protector and helper in agriculture became the most significant one (Hsieh 2012). Kuei-wen Hsieh argues that the worship of Shennong became particularly important in Taiwan precisely due to the large farming settler communities. He holds that, at least at the time of his study, Shennong was still

mainly prayed to for help in agriculture rather than for help in treating disease, even though he was also increasingly worshipped in urban areas.

During our studies, we also expected to find that the Divine Farmer's help was mainly invoked to help farmers and provide assistance for agriculture, especially in rural Hakka areas. This, then, would have made him potentially relevant to enlistment by farmers in combating the negative effects of climate change and environmental degradation. However, our observations from temples and conversations with worshippers and staff suggest that Shennong's most sought-after powers today are still his medical powers, which are only partly and indirectly related to environmental issues. His medicinal role may even have been further strengthened due to the physical and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several temples had pharmacological services in which visitors pray to Shennong before drawing lots that correspond to pieces of paper with a short (rather cryptic) text that requires interpretation by a member of the temple staff. This, in combination with other information provided by the worshipper, would be used by a staff member who had pharmacological knowledge to prepare the appropriate herbal medicine. Temples that offer the services of a medium who communicates directly with Shennong are very popular. One can ask for advice on a particular issue, solicit more general life guidance (問事) or ask for help related to one's own or a family member's health issues (問病). In the last case people may bring a piece of clothing belonging to the sick family member and present it to the medium.

This does not mean that Shennong worship has diminished overall, or, as we shall show later, that he does not play a meaningful role also in addressing environmental issues. The number of temples that are dedicated to or include Shennong did not decline after Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s, and as recently as 2017, Chang Hui Ting counted 195 temples in the whole of Taiwan that were primarily dedicated to the worship of Shennong (Chang 2017, 29).[9] While temples are rather evenly spread over the island, there is a larger concentration in the south and in areas with a large Hakka population. Many Hakka people migrated later and in lesser numbers to Taiwan than the Hoklo settlers from the Fujian area who had taken the best lands first. Being often poorer than the Hoklo, they were forced to practice agriculture in the more mountainous and remote area (see e.g., Wu 2012, 134). Hsieh (2012) suggests that they therefore needed "more blessings from the Divine Farmer Emperor to pray for smooth agricultural development and a bountiful harvest."

Since the end of the Civil War in 1949, the Chinese Shennong Association (中華神農大帝協進會) has provided a network for all member temples in Taiwan. They meet biannually in one of the temples, chosen through divination by casting so-called moon blocks. They also organize joint events, including cross-strait exchanges between Shennong temples in Taiwan and cultural or research organizations in China related to Emperor Yan, as the Chinese Communist Party prefers to name Shennong.[10]

Local Community Temples in the Taiwanese Religious Landscape

The establishment of the Shennong Medicine King Temple in Tainan was part of a comprehensive religious colonization of Taiwan that started in the middle of the seventeenth century and expanded steadily in the following centuries. Emigrants from the Fujian and Guangdong areas in Southern China carried with them some ashes from the incense burners of their home temples that were Buddhist, Daoist, lineage temples or temples dedicated to one of the many folk-religious cults of South China such as that of the sea goddess Mazu. They used the ashes to set up and consecrate places of worship in their newly established villages on the island. Some also brought statues of deities and of deified humans as well as ancestral tablets, and placed them initially in a part of a house or a simple temple. Migrants had few resources when they arrived and could not afford to build large, expensive structures. They would often place the statues belonging to different traditions within a temple that was primarily dedicated to one deity (Jones 1999, 7–8). A Shennong temple, for example, could also house statues of the Buddhist Guanyin Bodhisattva, Mazu and the local earth god. This has remained the practice, and, as is discussed below, East Asian religious practitioners often do not see contradictions in parallel worshipping of deities or deified humans belonging to different religious traditions. Studies on Taiwanese religion suggest that the larger extent to which this is the case in Taiwan in comparison to China is precisely related to the different historical trajectories of the establishment of temples in the two regions (Jones 1996, 20).

Not all local community temples were primarily dedicated to the deities of popular religions. The larger institutionalized religions, such as Buddhism, also started off in the first centuries of Chinese colonization as humble local temples in Taiwan with often only one monk or novice who was mainly responsible for funerals and divine protection. Ordination was only possible in China, and few had the resources to travel there and become fully ordained (Jones 1999, 9–11). It was not until the Japanese takeover that monastic Buddhism took off in Taiwan.

With the growing economic development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many temples were rebuilt, enlarged, refurbished and embellished by the contributions of local users expressing their gratitude for divine assistance and displaying the prosperity and prominence of their locality to their surrounding communities. In Fujian and Guangzhou where most migrants were from, local temples and ancestral halls constituted the site of power of a single local family or clan. However, those who migrated to Taiwan often traveled without their families and settled down in villages together with people who originated from different hometowns in the mainland. In this way, newly established temples provided social and political functions for migrant communities made up by different families (Jones 1996, 21).

This historical development might help explain why in Taiwan today community temples—including those primarily dedicated to Shennong—are characterized by being locally embedded but at the same time broad and inclusive. Taiwanese people worship mostly at home and in their local temple (Weller 2006, 106). They are not so concerned with which deities end up in the temple, as long as they have access to the necessary ritual services and divine assistance. Furthermore, such community temples are not administered by a large, institutionalized religion and the worshippers are not compelled to adhere to strict doctrines and liturgical practices. This makes the temples relatively adaptable and open to change where it concerns the needs of its users. As such, as we shall see, they provide an enabling space and vehicle for local communities to both address local problems and mobilize to make themselves heard in the larger society.

According to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior, at the end of 2021 there were 15,186 registered religious buildings—that is, temples and churches—in Taiwan (Liu 2022). Registration is mandatory for active temples and churches if they want to be exempt from paying taxes. Compared to, for instance, the Netherlands which has 5,400 churches in use for 17.7 million people, Taiwan has approximately twice as many religious venues per inhabitant, indicating the important role of temples in society today. In a media article commenting on these findings, the journalist ironically points out that there are more religious venues available for Taiwanese people than convenience stores (Liu 2022). Of these religious buildings, 65 percent were officially registered as Daoist, 15 percent as Buddhist and 18 percent as Christian. Temples for popular religions, including those dedicated to Shennong, are not registered as a separate category but are included under Daoist temples. To fully grasp the position of the beliefs and practices of popular religions in one of Asia's most developed countries, we have to turn to a 2018 survey by the Institute of Sociology of the Academia Sinica which shows that 49.3 percent of respondents consider themselves believers in "popular religion" (民間宗教), while only 12.4 percent consider themselves to be Daoist, 14 percent Buddhist, 6.8 percent Christian, and 13.2 percent state that they have no religious beliefs (Fu 2020, 161).

According to the same survey, about two thirds of the population believe to a varying degree in an immortal soul that needs to be worshipped by surviving kin to be able to find peace (Fu 2020, 176–77). Ancestor worship is one of the central aspects of Chinese cosmological beliefs and imported religious teachings such as Buddhism have had to accommodate these beliefs before becoming widespread among Chinese people. Some Christian missionaries, for instance, considered ancestral worship as a major obstacle in spreading Christianity in China (e.g., Coe 2016, 9). Another impediment to the spread of Christianity has been its universalist claim of exclusivity in addressing all spiritual, moral, soteriological, or other social or transcendent needs people might have. Most East Asian religions, including the

highly institutionalized ones such as Buddhism, do not aspire to fulfill all such needs and can co-exist with other religions and belief systems (see e.g., Gellner 1997 and Teeuwen 2003). From the vantage point of the Taiwanese believers, it follows that ceremonies honoring ancestors or for asking them for help and protection can be held at temples for Buddhism, Daoism or any popular religion alike. According to the above-mentioned statistics, 80 percent of Taiwanese respondents state that they adhere simultaneously to different beliefs (Liu 2022).

Fengping Temple, dedicated to Shennong, is a good example of the mobilizing capability of folk-religious temples. When visiting the temple in the beginning of 2024, little indicated to us that it had been at the center of intense environmental protests from 1987 to 1990, and again in 2004. It is situated in Houjin, a suburb of Taiwan's main port city of Kaohsiung, in a residential area close to a park full of trees. The name of the park—Kaohsiung Refinery Green Belt—provides a hint to the recent past, and all along the length of the park, for about 500–600 meters, stretches a high wall with faded paintings of birds, elephants and other animals. This signals a contrast to the area behind the wall which is marked on Google maps as a cultural heritage site named the Original Location of Taiwan China Petroleum Kaohsiung Refinery (台灣中油公司高雄煉油廠原址).

In 1987 the government announced that a new plant would be added to the China Petroleum Refinery in Houjin. The area was already suffering from heavy air pollution and residents feared that the new plant would make the situation even worse. Despite heavy protests between 1987 and 1990, including people traveling to Taipei to protest in front of the Legislative Yuan, the government went ahead with the construction, though it did make several concessions. Most importantly, it promised to shut down the most polluting parts of the existing refinery, and close and relocate the entire refinery by 2015 (see Lu 2009 and Hsieh 2012). The case is rather famous in recent Taiwanese political and environmental history because it coincided with—and was to some extent part of—the democratization process of the country. The initial protests took place a few weeks before martial law was abolished in 1987, and the large media focus on the ensuing blockade turned Houjin into a symbol of the fight against the authoritarian ruling Kuomintang party (Lu 2009, 58). Environmental protests were one of the very few forms of civil disobedience that were tolerated by the regime at the time and such protests were therefore able to galvanize the population in demanding overall political change. Some have argued that precisely through furthering local interests, community temples played an active role in the democratization of Taiwan (see e.g., Katz 2003, 405).

What makes the Houjin events even more relevant to our study is the role played by the Shennong Fengping Temple in the protests. Not only did it provide an organizational platform, but, maybe more importantly, it offered divine and moral support to the protesters. Leading up to the large protest in 1990, people burned incense to

Shennong at the temple, and they only went out to protest after they received his approval after having cast divination blocks and interpreted other divine signs (Weller 2006, 105). The following year several women reported getting divine messages in their dreams telling them that construction of the plant would lead to a catastrophe in Houjin (Lu 2009, 63). Weller (2006) argues that it is precisely the temples' concern with the well-being of the locality that has the potential to generate and support social action, including environmental activism. People belonging to a community temple expect the deities associated with the temple to stand up for the benefit of the community when it is threatened by outside forces. This includes also safeguarding the livelihood of future generations. Threats to the natural environment are not only harmful for those living now but due to the moral duties associated with filial piety, they are conceived as threats to the very continuation of the lineage (Weller 2006, 122). Since people protest out of local and personal concerns, such as their health or that of their children and grandchildren, this form of environmentalism centered on community temples works well, for example, to oppose pollution. According to Weller, it is less effective in mobilizing for more "abstract and universalizing ideals" like biodiversity or nature for its own sake. He contrasts this to the environmental consciousness and activism displayed by globalized urban elites in Taiwan who, for example, participate in Taiwanese environmental NGOs (Weller 2006, 122, 134).

Weller provides a convincing analysis of environmentalism and community temple engagement in Taiwan in the first decade of the democratization period. In the following two decades, Taiwan, like the rest of the world, experienced a widening realization of the threat of irreversible global warming, but, in comparison with many other parts of the world, it has also seen the growing development and sophistication of its civil society. Several popular surveys about views on climate change, renewable energy and other issues carried out by the Taiwan Institute for Sustainable Energy suggest a high level of environmental acknowledgment and awareness of these issues in the Taiwanese population.[11] Visiting temples across the island and talking to people working or worshipping there indicated to us that many people, regardless of social status or religious belief, are well aware of global environmental threats and their local consequences, and, not the least, of the need to address them. And, in doing so, community temples and associated deities can be instrumental. When we asked one of the leaders of Fengping Temple about the Divine Farmer's relevance as god of agriculture in a contemporary urbanized community faced with the effects of industrialization and global warming, he answered: "Shennong is in our daily lives, we have been brought up with him, we have this temple and can use it for whatever we need it for … What the people want is also what the temple wants!"

As we discuss below, our research suggests that concerns about local environmental problems and their possible solutions have gradually broadened to include more general issues of environmental destruction, loss of biodiversity and climate

change. The awareness of connections between the local and the global were reflected in many people's descriptions to us of their environment and experiences. They were for instance, experiencing typhoons that have increased in strength and frequency, more droughts and flooding and a discourse in the media that is more likely than before to situate such events in the context of much larger planetary changes. Simultaneously, the government has made a point of communicating the need to step up the efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and, at the same time, combat pollution. Of particular relevance to our study, a number of environmentally engaged urbanized intellectuals have started to consider community temples as a valuable repository for culturally appropriate inspiration and assistance in solving the global environmental crisis.

We discuss this further in the next section in which we also introduce Operation Shennong (神農計畫) by the Lovely Taiwan Foundation as a case in point of how a Shennong "brand" may also be used by a secular NGO attempting to revitalize the Taiwanese countryside by funding teaching of ecological farming at primary schools.

Shennong's New Role

Community temples cater to the needs of the community, such as providing a space for social life, for worshipping one's ancestors and for supplicating for divine support when encountering existential or everyday problems. Historically, the Divine Farmer, as the god of agriculture and inventor of medicine, was worshipped by a settler population whose basic existence was contingent on successful harvests and surviving diseases. Our conversations with worshippers and temple personnel provide evidence that, in line with Shennong's historical credentials, health issues are still a major reason for people to seek divine help at their local temple.[12] When everything else has failed, or simply to supplement modern medical science, people will seek help and comfort in their local temple. When we asked people about their need for his assistance in agriculture, however, we found little to suggest that people, even in rural areas where most of the Shennong temples are situated, expected his help in this respect. Increased urbanization of the countryside and modernization of farming methods were obvious reasons for the Divine Farmer's assistance in agricultural matters having become redundant. The caretaker of a Shennong temple in an area with significant strawberry production that was facing huge challenges due to drier weather told us: "We have our phones for checking the weather, so we do not need Shennong for this anymore." What people do need Shennong for, in addition to solving individual health issues, is similar to what many people pray for at other temples in cities and in the countryside: help for themselves or their children to pass examinations, find a spouse, win in the lottery or pick the right company to invest in.

However, as we have discussed above, Chinese popular religion has shown great flexibility when practitioners' needs have changed in a changing world. From the point of view of the people going to the temples to worship, it does not seem to matter that Shennong in earlier times was especially worshipped as an agricultural deity, as long as he can help solve their present-day problems. One elderly worshipper expressed it this way: "You just need to believe deep inside that your individual problems will be solved."

At the same time, in publications by Shennong temples and several Taiwanese academics we can see a trend to actively make Shennong worship relevant, consistent and fitting for people living in today's Taiwan. When Shennong's mythological past as a benevolent mediator between nature and humans is invoked, his role is consciously refashioned into a culturally rooted ally in combating the environmental crises of our time. This rationalization of religion whereby people try to make their practices and ideas more systematized and coherent is part of a global process of religious change. Referring to Max Weber's rationalization concept, Weller explains how religions in China and Taiwan accommodated and adapted to this worldwide trend of religious rationalization that

> contributes to the extraction of religious belief from the general experience of daily life to the change from a taken-for-granted religiosity/life to a self-conscious and reflective "religion." Religion becomes something most clearly represented by its texts, rather than by the repetition of contextual practice. (Weller 2015, 16)

The most comprehensive project of refashioning Shennong worship into a religion that is relevant in addressing the environmental crises both locally and globally is taking place in Qingyun Temple in Ruifang, a forty-five-minute drive to the east of Taipei. The temple, primarily dedicated to Shennong, moved to its present location sixty years ago. It is built in the traditional style of southern Chinese temples and is surrounded by forested hills on three sides. The impressive building is made up of several connected sections, with a low main hall in the front part and a large section rising six stories high at the back. All the roof eaves are elaborately adorned, and the entire building is red and white throughout, giving it an aesthetically appealing appearance. Extensions and renovations have been carried out recently and on our last visit in January 2024, construction work was still going on. Qingyun Temple is only a short walk from Jiufen, a small, picturesque town perched on a steep mountainside, which until 1971 was dependent on goldmining, but in recent years has been attracting many tourists. According to the Ruifang Qingyundian booklet (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.), many miraculous discoveries of gold were attributed to Shennong's answering of prayers, which has made the temple both popular and famous.

Figure 1.1: Qingyun Temple in Ruifang. (Photo by Koen Wellens)

Besides Shennong, who is represented by red, black and green-faced statues, the temple also houses other deities, including the earth god, and it contains a dedicated Buddhist wing. What is striking when visiting the temple on almost any day of the week is the various types of activities taking place: people individually or in small groups burning incense, drinking water from the sacred Shennong source, standing in queues to consult the medium; groups of uniformed volunteers with the name of the temple on their backs praying, reciting scriptures, or listening to lectures; and the occasional tourists taking selfies in front of the temple. On weekends and certain other days larger rituals take place in which men in red trousers and bare upper bodies dance, accompanied by drumming, apparently in a trance. Worshippers are purified by temple staff burning paper over their heads, and visitors may put their fingerprints on a wall painting representing the tree of life. The temple attracts visitors and volunteers from all over Taiwan. The reason for this success, according to the temple's website is that it is "the most complete and comprehensive temple in the Shennong system in the world," including its well-developed and popular "questioning ceremony" (問事) in which worshippers can communicate with Shennong through a medium to obtain his advice (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.).

However, another important factor in the success of Qingyun Temple, is, undoubtedly, its charismatic female leader. She has been very ambitious on behalf of the temple, and both made and attracted large financial donations. This has allowed its expansion, of the physical temple structure, but, not the least, of the scope and popularity of its activities. As one of only four female leaders of Shennong temples and teamed up with a female medium, she might be seen as representing a new and more appealing form of traditional popular religion, including the revamping of the social functions of the community temple. We were often told by visitors that they kept coming back to the temple because its welcoming and friendly atmosphere made them feel at home.

The website and Facebook pages of Qingyun Temple are aesthetically very attractive, with stylish designs and professional photographs of statues, ritual dancers and other temple scenes. Nevertheless, it is only when reading some of the content on the sites that one starts to grasp the conscious, well-argued and consistent reasoning that lies beneath the project of making Shennong relevant in modern times. One telling example is this prayer by the temple head at the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020. First she links the epidemic to the necessity of respecting the natural ecology (自然生態), and how it has brought everyone's attention to environmental factors such as climate change, the need for a new level of ecological balance and "symbiosis between all beings" (萬物共生). And here we can ask Shennong for help, she writes:

> Shennong invented agriculture, personally tasted hundreds of herbs for medicine, bartered goods at the market at noontime, taught people to build houses, weave hemp for clothing, make musical instruments, make pottery for utensils, drill wood to make fire, and use magnificent wooden drums to drive away insects. Consequently, human life took a step further and moved toward the light. The spirit of the Eight Achievements of Emperor Shennong is closely linked to today's life and has made great contributions to mankind. It is the ancestor of human ecology that provides us with beautiful living conditions. Today we pray here to Emperor Shennong to lead us back to our original aspiration, to return to the harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature, and to the original aspiration of ecological balance. We pray that Emperor Shennong will bless lost mankind with the glory of his vast and mighty divine favor. We pray that the turbulent and unstable popular feelings will be stable, that they will cooperate with each other, unite with nature, and be in symbiosis with all things. Let the Earth that cannot carry the heavy weight anymore regain its ecological balance. We wish here that all people around the world will get through the epidemic disaster safe and sound! (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.)

Many of the walls in Qingyun Temple have illustrated posters extolling the past deeds of Shennong and the uses of the medicinal herbs he discovered. Some others

contain cartoons about how people today are risking their lives by consuming unhealthy food additives, much in the way Shennong lost his when tasting which plants were edible and which were poisonous. Among the posters there are also announcements of lectures held at the temple on environmental issues or topics related to Chinese history or culture given by academics or other specialists. Most of the lectures are organized by a professor emeritus in close collaboration with the head of the temple. The intended audience are the temple volunteers and the students and colleagues of the speaker. In April 2023 the temple also co-sponsored an international conference on soil, arranged by the professor. Several of the conference panels took place at Qingyun Temple. The online conference announcement contains a reference to a remark made by the head of Qingyun Temple, pointing out that the worship of the Divine Farmer emphasizes the principles of ecological balance and the coexistence of all beings.[13]

The way the temple provides a platform for the interchange between academia and popular religion is, as far as we know, quite unique in Taiwan. Intellectuals and artists are drawn to the temple to present, perform or participate in a lecture, and they meet a vibrant Shennong temple with a charismatic leadership that is set on addressing the pressing environmental challenges of our time while helping people solve their personal problems, all through the help of an ancient Chinese cultural hero, the Divine Farmer. At the same time, Shennong worshippers, whether the more than one hundred volunteers or other regular visitors, may receive state-of-the-art academic input on the challenges facing the planet and humanity, how plants can heal, or how to reduce one's CO_2 imprint. From Qingyun Temple's perspective, this constitutes a double win: the temple and its worship of Shennong make available a spiritual addition to the world of science, while scientific knowledge contributes to the systemization and rationalization of a rather fuzzy and incoherent traditional belief system, making it more relevant and attractive to the believers.

Although Qingyun Temple is exceptional in the range and scale of its activities, it has also served as inspiration to other temples; for instance, the leader of the temple committee of the Temple of Five Grains in the Hakka village of Sanyi told us that they often collaborate with Qingyun Temple and participate in a common ritual initiated by Qingyun Temple called "Love the Planet" (愛地球) that is focused on the environment.

As mentioned above, we visited Fengping Temple because it is rather famous as the place of massive environmental protests in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is no coincidence that this temple today also underscores the Divine Farmer's potential contribution to environmental protection and ecology. In an article on Shennong worship in Taiwan, Hsieh (2012) also uses Fengping Temple in Houjin as a prime example of how communities "assign new roles to the deities" as a result of the development of society and its belief systems. Shennong is portrayed by the temple

as a "pioneer in environmental protection" because he, for example, demanded that people refrain from indiscriminate killing of animals during the Spring and Summer breeding seasons, allowing all beings to proliferate and grow (Hsieh 2012). Hsieh ends his article with a call for further integration of Shennong beliefs and the environmental movement. At the same time, he also exhorts academics to be part of this development by analyzing what is happening as a "paradigm of the revitalization of traditional folk beliefs."

The Secular Shennong

The legacy of the Divine Farmer has also been evoked to brand and promote environmental projects in a secular NGO, The Lovely Taiwan Foundation. "Everybody—whether young or old—knows the name of Shennong," one of the headmasters in a primary school told us in early 2024. His school was situated in a rural area of central Taiwan and most of the pupils were Hakka. For nearly nine years they had been part of a project called "Operation Shennong" (神農計畫) aimed at teaching children and their parents about organic agriculture in practice and in theory, while supporting local producers of organic products. The school was chosen as one of the foundation's ten rural "Shennong schools," ordinary primary schools, which have integrated the teaching of plants, ecology and small-scale agriculture into their curriculum. The Lovely Taiwan Foundation was founded in 2009 by a private businessman, Ko Wen Chang, who was looking for a way to support rural areas with projects based in local culture that might also help limiting the out-migration of young people to the cities, and in 2015 Operation Shennong was launched. It is a decentralized organization in which a few people in the foundation coordinate the project, while the practical training of teachers is carried out mainly by local farmers.

When we asked the headmaster and one of his colleagues why this project had taken on the name of Shennong, they both laughed and said that it "had nothing to do with beliefs (信仰) or religion (宗教)." Shennong, in their view, was the name of a historical person with strong roots in the Hakka community, famous for his knowledge of plants and agriculture. When people hear the name of Shennong, they immediately think of plants and plant-based medicine; they connect the name to the soil, and therefore also to agriculture, they explained. The leaders in the primary school were very familiar with the local area, and they argued that the Shennong project was well-received in a local population increasingly aware of the long-term problems of heavily polluted soil, and of climate change resulting in warmer and dryer weather negatively affecting their agricultural output. In the Operation Shennong project, the Divine Farmer serves as a familiar culturally

Figure 1.2: Wugu Temple with Shennong overlooking the community and the nearby local school (Miaoli County). (Photo by Koen Wellens)

embedded symbol of concern for plants, health, soil and the ability to act on it. "Shennong was a human being capable of solving problems, and when people hear his name, they are inspired to come up with new suggestions about what we can do in our project; they get ideas because the reference to Shennong can imply so many different things," the coordinator of Operation Shennong told us. Many parents

and grandparents tell the children stories about Shennong and take them to the temples to worship him for New Year and other festivals. Nevertheless, apart from his prominent position in the title of the project, the Divine Farmer has little to say for the actual organization and the content of it. The teaching material developed by the project focuses on basic science explained in simple ways to children, on practical exercises on small plots of lands within each school, and on stories of people's and other living beings' connections to nature and the natural world. The spirit of Shennong is first of all enlisted as a kind of "protector" of the project to generate feelings of cultural recognition. The only mention of the Divine Farmer in the book describing Operation Shennong is a lyric description in the preface by the renowned Taiwanese art historian and author, Hsun Chiang:

> The order of nature and the moral principles of the soil of the Shennong era may not be far away at all. If "little Shennongs" appear one after another in primary schools in the villages and towns of Taiwan, we might see that the hope of redeeming nature and soil is just around the corner. (Chiang 2020, 6–7)

Operation Shennong is a good example of how the spirit and transcendent values of the Divine Farmer and all he is associated with, can attract attention and trigger visions of the future based in an ideal mythical past, also among artists, intellectuals and environmental activists.

Conclusion

As in many democratic countries, environmental concerns in Taiwan today are addressed through both a relatively well-functioning political system and a robust and active civil society. Likewise, as in many other countries, environmental engagements by these two sectors of society often overlap: most leaders of Taiwan's tiny but influential Green Party have a past as environmental NGO-activists, and Taiwan's largest political party, the Democratic Progressive Party, has included a strong environmentalist agenda in its push for democratization and throughout its subsequent participation in electoral policies (Fell 2021, 7, 34). In order to understand the full scope of how Taiwanese civil society addresses the environmental challenges it is facing, we have to look beyond the actions of local and global "classic" NGOs. This article has attempted to contribute to this by zooming in on the activities surrounding the legendary Divine Farmer, Shennong. The Divine Farmer temples we have discussed in this article, differ from the socially engaged Buddhist organizations in that they are not part of larger more rigid institutionalized religions, but are strongly embedded in local communities. Being focused on catering

to the changing needs and well-being of these communities and shaped by their specific Taiwanese historical course, Shennong temples are characterized by a high level of flexibility, adaptability and inclusiveness.

In times when the climate and environmental crises have reached all corners of the planet and a growing number of people have realized their urgency, some Shennong temples are now exploring new ways of letting the Divine Farmer play a role in addressing also these challenges. This is a concerted effort by worshippers who look to their local temple for help and support in a changing world where their well-being and that of their children and grandchildren is threatened; by temple leaders who are determined to keep their institution relevant in the community; and, finally, by some environmentally concerned academics who are looking at new ways to solicit support for their cause in the larger population. For the time being, Taiwanese Shennong temples do not seem to have plans to follow in the footsteps of Buddhist organizations such as Tzu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain and take the Divine Farmer global.

However, in recent years, we have seen regular visits by Taiwanese Shennong worshippers and temple staff to China. As part of the Chinese Communist Party's attempt at legitimizing its rule through a Chinese nationalistic discourse, the shared role of Shennong in Chinese culture has given Taiwanese Shennong temple leaders and worshippers access to China, and thereby also provided a possibility to propagate the Divine Farmers' potential new environmental role. On a paradigmatic level, the case of the Divine Farmer shows us how local worshippers of a folk-religious tradition can work in partnership with urban intellectuals to address environmental challenges in new ways. This demonstrates how religion and science can complement each other in ways that may help to alter more conventional views that conceive science and religion as belonging to largely separate and autonomous domains; thereby also motivating more people—perhaps including those in power—to strengthen their efforts to solve the environmental crisis.

Notes

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[2] For instance, Chen and Li this volume; Dung 2021; Lee and Han 2015; Chen and Hansen 2022; Lin 1999.

[3] https://www.dharmadrum.org/ (accessed June 5, 2024) and Sheng Yen 2023.

[4] In Ruifang District, in Taipei City, in Miaoli County (in the townships of Tongluo, Gongguan, Zhunan and Sanyi) and in Kaohsiung (Houjin).

[5] Wellens 2010a, 2010b and 2017; Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018; Hansen and Liu 2018; Ahlers, Hansen and Svarverud 2020; Chen and Hansen 2022.

[6] See Henricks 1998 and Hsieh 2006 and 2012 on the identification of Shennong as Emperor Yan in Chinese historical texts.

[7] The Hakka and Hoklo are the main sub-groups within the Han Chinese majority of Taiwan. With 4.6 million people the Hakka constitute approximately one-fifth of the population. They have their own language and to some extent distinct cultural traditions.

[8] Most sources published by temples or found on Taiwanese websites contain more or less similar descriptions of Shennong and his achievements, see e.g., Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.; Ruifang Qingyundian guanli weiyuanhui n.d.; Hsieh 2012.

[9] Chang compiled this number from the "National Directory of Temples, Shrines, Halls, Altars, and Platforms Dedicated to Worshiping the Divine Farmer" (全國奉祀神農大帝宮、廟、殿、堂、壇通訊錄). The leader of the Qingyun Temple in Ruifang suggested that the number of temples where Shennong is the main deity is only around ninety while more than three hundred are temples where he is a deity but not the major one (interview January 2023).

[10] One such official Chinese organization is the Research Institute of [Emperors] Yan and Huang (炎黄研究会). For a report on a visit to Mainland China, see Lin 2023.

[11] https://www.taise.org.tw/news-view.php?ID=382 (accessed April 24, 2024).

[12] On Taiwanese popular religion as healing resources, see Hsun 2006.

[13] https://qyt.tw/images/easyblog_articles/552/Information.pdf (accessed April 26, 2024).

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CHAPTER 2

Yogic Ecology? Spirituality, Science, and Pseudoscience in Indian Agroecological Movements for Soil Health

Daniel Münster

Abstract

The chapter examines the role of religion and spirituality in sustainable agriculture in India. Through case studies of figures like Albert Howard, Masanobu Fukuoka, Subhash Palekar, and yoga gurus Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru, it explores how religious and spiritual idioms contribute to agroecological movements' critiquing modern agronomy's reductionist approach and highlighting the ecological and political-economic costs of the Green Revolution. The paper discusses the ontological politics of living soils and the potential of spiritually inspired agroecology to foster sustainable human-nature relationships. It concludes that while spiritually informed natural farming can challenge extractive practices, the impact varies based on the integration of spirituality into agricultural methods.

Keywords: Agroecology, agriculture, gurus, spiritual critique, greenwashing, ontological politics

Introduction

As agriculture's lack of environmental and economic sustainability is dawning on communities across India, the question arises about the cultural and social resources that can be used for its ecological renewal.[1] In light of this, this chapter examines the role religion can (and does) play in a sustainable transformation of agriculture in India, a sector consisting largely of small-scale farming.

In recent years, many authors have written about the end of hegemony and consent in Indian agricultural science and practice. Many farmers and scientists have come to question the assumed truth of the claims of modern agronomy, including the claimed superiority of hybridized seeds and animals, and the need for artificial fertilizers for the management of soil health. Such truth claims are based on foundational assertions about how to understand and measure soil properties to such an extent that they can be said to have ontological effects. One particularly salient ontological effect of modern agronomy is that it produces a reality in which soil becomes inert

matter, a physical-chemical substrate in need of chemical management. Currently, however, the shared consensus on agronomy among farmers, scientists, and policymakers has been lost. Defined as the "scientific and intellectual endeavor that seeks to understand and affect the biological, ecological, physical, socio-cultural and economic bases of crop production and land management" (Sumberg, J. Thompson, and Woodhouse 2012, 1), agronomy faces contestations from within and outside the field. These contestations emerged in India as the political-economic (Cullather 2004; Moore 2015; Patel 2013) and ecological costs (D. Pimmentel and M. Pimmentel 1990; Shiva 1991) of the Green Revolution became evident in the fields and in the academy beginning in the late 1980s (Flachs 2016). As Sundberg et al. (2012) argue, the emergent critique of state-led development in general, and of the Green Revolution agronomy in particular, as being inefficient, undemocratic, and damaging to soils as living ecosystems has come from highly divergent actors driven by a range of different agendas, including neoliberal, participatory, and environmental ones. In this chapter, I focus on the latter and explore environmental criticism of (the Green Revolution) agronomy as brought forward by advocates of agrarian alternatives in India.

While sustainable agriculture movements have received a good share of scholarly attention, we know very little about how and in which idiom—including religious idioms—these contestations of and within agronomy unfold. Focusing on instances and genealogies of sustainable agriculture, I argue that religious and spiritual idioms have been an essential cultural and social resource for agroecological soil activism and what we might call ontological politics, a politics that contributes toward producing sustainable human-nature relationships by reworking peoples' reality, including the reality of the soil. In the case of soil health, ontological politics works toward practices and understandings that enact soil as a living ecosystem. The prominent figures examined in this chapter display a religious idiomatic to varying degrees and with variegated boundaries between religious, nationalist, and scientific styles of argumentation.

Based on intermittent long-term fieldwork on alternative agriculture movements in India since 2013, combined with textual analysis of primary documents (online and printed) and targeted ethnographic fieldwork in South India in 2023, this chapter will introduce a range of agroecological engagements with soil health and discuss how key actors mobilize spirituality, tradition, science, and what some authors call pseudoscience, in pursuing their goal of establishing ecological ways of farming. The articulations of religious and scientific dissent from mainstream agriculture are very diverse in India and often expressed in variegated combinations by movements and their leaders. In this chapter I present a range of alternative sustainability-focused engagements with soil health by focusing on several public figures, all of whom happen to be men, and all of whom have left a considerable trail of written and audiovisual material.

Ontological Politics of Living Soils

In his book *Farmers, Subalterns, and Activists: Social Politics of Sustainable Agriculture in India*, geographer Trent Brown (2018) asks whether alternative agriculture movements are counterhegemonic struggles in a Gramscian sense. His conclusion is negative: "Sustainable agriculture in India is so imbricated within hegemonic relations that, more often, it forms a link in the chain of the corporate food regime, rather than a radical alternative to it" (Brown 2018, 178). Among the factors he identifies as limiting agroecology's counterhegemonic force are its dependence on state institutions, non-state donor organizations, and the urban middle classes as consumers. None of these actors, Brown argues, necessarily have the best interest of the rural poor and India's farming communities in mind. While I concur with this analysis from a class perspective, I want to shift attention to the ontological impact that alternative agriculture movements may have and put a lens on their engagement with science on the one hand, and with religion (Hinduism and Vedic traditions) on the other. This is not to say that religion and spirituality are a necessary component of alternative agriculture movements. Miguel Altieri, for example, defines agroecology as "the science of natural resource management for poor farmers in marginal environments" (Altieri 2002), that is, in exclusively scientific terms. However, both historically and today, alternative agriculture in India has had strong affinities to variegated religious and spiritual ways of being in the world, including, by association, affinities to nationalism and nativism.

With ontological politics, I refer to contestations about the "grounds and architecture" (Fortun 2014, 321) of knowledge and reality. Following critical traditions in science and technology studies, I am interested in challenges to agronomy that, by drawing on religious and scientific resources, might contribute to *enacting* different relationships between people, soils, animals and plants. In this chapter I ask to what extent spiritually inspired agroecology has the potential to challenge the ontological foundation of mainstream agronomy by inspiring novel practices of agricultural "world-making" (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013, 325); or whether it perhaps falls short of such far-reaching reorientations and remains within the realm of environmental philanthropy. I thus ask a twofold question: how do some branches of alternative agriculture in India draw on scientific and religious registers, and how are they utilizing religion for ecological world-making practices in agriculture?

I hold that the encounter of spirituality and agroecology in India is caught between two seemingly contradictory tendencies: the scientization of Hinduism on the one hand, and what we might call the Hinduization of science on the other. Both of these tendencies and projects have long been the cornerstones of claims to Hindu supremacy. Axel Michaels traces the claim that Hinduism, and in particular its spiritualities in the yoga tradition, are not based on dogma but on empirical

science going back to Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the "inventor of scientized yoga" (Michaels and Wulf 2020, 6). The flip side of that argument is the claim that many modern scientific achievements either have their origin in, or have been presaged in, the Vedas or by rishis, ancient yogic "seers." Among the more amusing claims of this kind of rhetoric is that the elephant-headed God Ganesha is proof of advanced plastic surgery in ancient India. As many authors have pointed out, environmentalism in India, and agrarian environmentalism in particular, have suffered from affinities to anti-Western cultural critiques, an imagined Hindu past free of conflict and inequalities, and a generally backward-looking anti-science stance (Baviskar, Sinha, and Philip 2006; Brown 2018; Münster 2020; Nanda 2003).

Agroecological movements across the globe occupy an ambivalent space between revaluing and reinventing traditional knowledge, including religious beliefs, and reimagining a timeless past of ecological harmony, while at the same time embracing scientific advances in agroecology, soil science, microbiology, and plant science. The paradox I am chasing in this chapter refers to the tendency of agroecology to claim and demand epistemological and even ontological reorientations, and that these reorientations are based both on science and religion—in some cases simultaneously, in some hybridized, in others as code switching between registers of argumentation, and yet in other cases as a continuum or sliding scale of rigorous and non-rigorous styles of thought and practice. In this chapter I hope to show that alternative agriculture is a good arena for showing both nuances in and differences between specific blends of science and religion. My chapter does not present one case study but a selection of instances in which science/religion problematics have flared up in the work of five key figures in agricultural environmentalism who have all foregrounded new ontologies of soil: Sir Albert Howard, Masanobu Fukuoka, Subhash Palekar, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Sadhguru. I begin with Sir Albert Howard, a scientific critic of agricultural sciences, who introduces the idea of a misguided "mentality" being the foundation of destructive forms of soil care. I present his contribution as case for a non-religious ontological critique of agronomy.

Albert Howard: Agroecology and the Question of Mentality

In his book *An Agricultural Testament*, published in 1945, Albert Howard (2013 [1940], 18) called out industrializing agriculture for what he calls the "NPK mentality," which according to him, had begun dominating "farming alike in the experimental stations and the countryside." Howard (1873–1947), who is widely regarded as a pioneer of agroecology in India, understood the NPK mentality as an emerging

"Western" paradigm that combined chemicals of war (ammonia) with a simplified notion of soil nutrition based on synthetic fertilizers:

> The feature of the manuring of the West is the use of artificial manures. The factories engaged during the Great War in the fixation of atmospheric nitrogen for the manufacture of explosives had to find other markets, the use of nitrogenous fertilizers in agriculture increased, until today the majority of farmers and market gardeners base their manurial programme on the cheapest forms of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) on the market. (Howard 2013 [1940], 18)

The NPK mentality, according to Howard, is the underlying mental orientation of, in his time, the ongoing processes of the mechanization and chemicalization of agriculture through the use of tractors and NPK fertilizers, respectively. While Howard acknowledges the short-term increases in profit and productivity through "artificials," the reduction of labor needs on the farm, and the reduced trouble of not having to care for farm animals as providers of manure, he issues a warning about the "other side of this picture":

> These chemicals and these machines can do nothing to keep the soil in good heart. By their use the processes of growth can never be balanced by the processes of decay … That this is so will be much clearer when the attempts now being made to farm without any animals at all march to their inevitable failure. (Howard 2013 [1940], 18)

The "inevitable failure" of the NPK mentality lies in a faulty relationship to soil. Soil becomes a substrate, replenished with artificial nutrients rather than a living body dependent on the processes of growth and decay. It extracts the functions and properties of healthy soil for short-term gain. The NPK mentality also obliterates the need to keep animals on the farm, thus reducing farming from a multispecies affair to a simplified production machine, leading to "inevitable failure."

Sir Albert Howard (knighted in 1934) was a British botanist and agronomist who is most famous for his work at the Institute of Plant Industry in Indore, in contemporary Madhya Pradesh, where, from 1924 to 1931, he developed the so-called Indore Process of composting plant waste and animal manure. Howard's work is significant as the intellectual and experimental foundation of Indian and global organic farming movements and agroecology as a science. In this chapter, his example serves to set the stage for several tendencies and tensions in natural and organic farming in contemporary India. His work is a historical starting point for exploring the shifting balances between scientific and religious registers in alternative agriculture movements. Both the terms "scientific" and "religious" are nearly impossible to define and to delineate. I use them as rough heuristics to distinguish

styles of reasoning and argumentation that refer to either the methods or authority of science or the methods and authority of tradition, vitality and, for lack of a better term, a sense of wonder about how plants grow.

Contemporary agroecological movements can be understood as inhabiting the contradictory space of a critique of scientific agronomy based, on one hand, on religious idioms and practices and, on the other, on scientific advances putatively ignored by the agronomical mainstream. Spiritually inspired agroecology thus claims to be both more spiritual and more scientific than agronomy. The first point to establish is that agroecology is not just the foundation of an alternative way of doing agriculture—it is also a form of critique. Howard's critique of the NPK mentality as "the attitude of mind which sees all virtue in the use of artificials" (Howard 2006 [1945], 71) is, on one hand, a critique of attitudes of the mind, styles of thought, and convictions about soils and animals, and on the other, an indictment of its embeddedness in the scientific method of modern agronomy. To Howard the shortcomings of the agricultural research station are personified in the form of its main protagonist: the "laboratory hermit," a persona that stands for a divorce of theory from practice and who has succumbed to the "temptation" of reductive methodology:

> [For the laboratory hermit] … the temptation to grow a few isolated plants in pots filled with sand—watered by a solution containing the requisite amount of NPK in a balanced form so that anyone constituent did not outdo the others—draw them, measure them, tie them up in muslins, weigh them, burn them, and analyse them proved too great. (Howard 2006 [1945], 74)

Howard is a significant starting point in a discussion of science and religion in agroecology, because he was positioning himself firmly in the camp of science in opposition to non-rigorous styles of thought. This is evident in his dry dismissal of biodynamic farming in the preface to *An Agricultural Testament*: "I remain unconvinced that the disciples of Rudolph Steiner can offer any real explanation of natural laws or have yet provided any practical examples which demonstrate the value of their theories" (Howard 2013 [1940], 1).

Biodynamic agriculture, the system Howard refers to, is arguably the first modern alternative agriculture system that was built on spiritual principles as a reaction to the perceived detrimental effects of agricultural development in late nineteenth-century Europe. Developed by the self-proclaimed "seer" and "visionary" Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) biodynamic agriculture is based on attuning farming to cosmic, "telluric" (earthly), and spiritual influences and rhythms, most important of which are the moon phases, and by using specific farm-produced "preparations" that inoculate compost heaps and soils. Biodynamic agriculture

is closely related to anthroposophy, a spiritual-philosophical-pedagogical system developed by Steiner from influences ranging to Indian theosophy and the science of the spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*) derived from German classical author J.W. Goethe. Despite Howard and others noticing that biodynamic agriculture cannot offer any "real explanations of natural laws" at work in its system, it has over the past century developed into a global model in alternative agriculture, known worldwide and also in India for its independent certification and branding as "Demeter" products.

In a speculative mode, Howard and Steiner would probably have agreed in their critique of, what in contemporary terms would be called, agronomy, however, they depart in their tolerance for extra-scientific explanations. Howard's critique of NPK mentality is rooted in an epistemic critique of a false mentality based on specifically located scientific paradigms and their respective methodologies. His critique is directed at an epistemic crossroads in the history of agricultural sciences associated with the work of Justus von Liebig (1803–1873), the German chemist and soil scientist, who died the year Howard was born. Liebig, in his seminal work on plant nutrition, commissioned by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Liebig 1843), had a far-reaching impact on the future of global agriculture. Liebig dismissed the idea of soil being a biological entity and explained plant growth entirely in chemical terms (Marchesi 2020). Since then, biological research on humus and soil organisms has been sidelined and chemistry has taken center stage as the "mother of all soil sciences" (interview note: Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, 2023). For Howard the "Liebig tradition" is primarily to fault for, in contemporary terms, enacting soil as dead matter: "It takes no account of the life of the soil" (2013 [1940], 37). The NPK mentality by extension becomes a mentality of artificiality. The critique raised by Howard against epistemic "temptations" and dangerous "mentality" gets its foundation in the notion of nature with a capital "N": "chemicals can never be a substitute for humus because Nature has ordained that the soil must live and the mycorrhizal association must be an essential link in plant nutrition" (Howard 2013 [1940], 37). At the most scientific end of a science-religion continuum then, Nature and vitality are the most closely associated with transcendental ideas. Nature reappears with the next flashlight on the founder of Natural Farming, Masanobu Fukuoka.

Masanobu Fukuoka and the Emergence of Natural Farming in India

"This is the mixture of science, philosophy, and religion" exclaimed Masanobu Fukuoka (1913–2008) holding up, between thumb and index finger, a hazelnut sized brown pellet—one of his famous clay balls. The year was 1997, and the scene is depicted in a documentary film (*Mimic Nature* 2017) about the then 84-year-old

Japanese farmer, scientist (microbiology), and inventor of natural farming visiting India in a celebration of India's fifty years of Independence from British colonial rule. The scene takes place at the Mahatma Gandhi Ashram in Madhya Pradesh in an event framed by spiritual music and attendees clad in ceremonial white dhotis. The clay pellets materialize Fukuoka's philosophy and work as a natural farmer. Containing seeds, soil and clay these balls are his main technique of reviving deserts, which he was active implementing in many countries, on all continents, including India (Fukuoka 2012). Fukuoka's technique consists of dispersing clay balls into desertified landscapes hoping for nature to do the work of reviving the degraded soils. His principles of natural farming that he first developed on his own farm in Japan and then taught in workshops across the world and in two best-selling books (Fukuoka [1978] 2009, 2012), are based on limiting human interventions in agriculture, to the point of rejecting the term cultivation: "Fortunately, after sixty years practice, there is no cultivation, no fertilizer, no chemicals, no weeding. I finally can grow any crop with natural farming" (Fukuoka in *Mimic Nature* 2017).

Fukuoka is relevant to this chapter for two reasons. First, he is a household name among alternative farming practitioners in India, and secondly, he introduced farming as an explicitly spiritual practice in India. When I first started research into alternative agriculture movements in Kerala, South India, Fukuoka was a common reference point for these otherwise very diverse and individualistic set of practitioners. Fukuoka has, for example, been a very important influence on Subhash Palekar, who, I argue, translated many of his principles into the popular Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF; Palekar 2011, 2012, 2013) which I return to below. Fukuoka was the only "foreigner" Palekar would acknowledge as having been an influence on his own intricate model of spiritual farming. Fukuoka was known in India as the inventor of "Do nothing agriculture" as many interlocutors would characterize it. A type of farming that is based on a spirituality of Nature that involves overcoming anthropocentrism and the cultivation of modest, non-consumerist lifestyles. His book, *The One Straw Revolution*, became a bestseller in India soon after its first English translation in 1978. Together with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), and Howard's *Agricultural Testament* (Howard 2013 [1940]), it brought food and agriculture into the fold of environmentalism in India, which had otherwise, at least until the emergence of the environmentalisms of the poor, been concerned mainly with wildlife conservation, a branch of environmentalism troubled by its legacy in the colonial project of protecting hunting grounds for colonial elites.

Unlike Howard and Carson, Fukuoka impressed on Indian alternative agriculture movements *three features* that have since been picked up in a range of "spiritual" agroecology movements. The first is a focus on the limits of human knowledge that is often articulated as a strong rejection of science. To quote the

documentary film again: "The natural farmer says no to science, all sciences. No! No, thank you. No nothing" (Fukuoka in the documentary). His genealogy of science gone wrong does not originate with Justus von Liebig's nineteenth-century paradigm shift toward chemical understandings of soil health, as does Howard's, but is rooted in a more profound rejection of the basis for European science in the philosophies of Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel (2012) and their underlying idea that humans are outside of nature. His own philosophy works to overcome human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism in approaches to farming.

Instead, and this is the second feature he has impressed on contemporary movements, he propagates farming on the basis of a philosophy of Nature (with a capital "N"). According to Larry Korn, his first translator, this philosophy came to him in a sudden revelation at the age of twenty-five. "He saw nature as a single, interconnected reality with no intrinsic characteristics. He saw time as an uninterrupted moment of the present with past and future embedded within it" (Korn 2012, xxii). This unitary nature does not require human care and engineering to flourish. He introduces the forest as the ultimate guide for farming, as a self-sufficient highly interconnected ecosystem. In agriculture, this Nature-centric view translates into a sense of the futility of human action, hence a farming style of "non-cultivation." "The earth cultivates itself," as he put it (Fukuoka 2009 [1978], 34). He taught soil practices based on "do nothing" or at least "do less": no ploughing, no weeding, no manure, no work, no fertilizers. The only intervention needed is to sow seeds according to observations of nature. It is thus not a particular technique that matters, but the particular "way of seeing the world" (Fukuoka 2012, 121), of participating in nature from the inside. Non-cultivation also translates into the idea of farming as "sacred work" (Fukuoka 2012, 113), which has become so influential in Indian alternative agriculture movements.

The third feature introduced by Fukuoka in India is thus the idea of alternative farming as an explicitly spiritual body-mind practice. According to Trent Brown, Fukuoka's philosophy is inspired by Buddhist philosophy and the "Taoist-inspired Zen school" in particular. Brown summarizes Fukuoka's spiritual take thus: "Fukuoka beautifully articulates natural farming as a form of spiritual practice that ultimately overcomes the sense of alienation, dissatisfaction and disenchantment that are characteristic of modern life" (Brown 2020). Agroecology as a spiritual response to alienating modernity is a recurring theme in India. At this point Fukuoka also resonates with Gandhian ideas of self-sufficiency, asceticism, and self-reliance. The idea of "doing less" on the farms translates into wanting less, aspiring for less. At least for less of the temptations of modern agriculture. Subhash Palekar later translated this into a "simple natural lifestyle" to be achieved by his followers.

It is possible to draw direct genealogical lines between Fukuoka's teachings and the Indian gurus of natural farming: The critique of science based on philosophical

differences with the West; the critique of anthropocentrism and the elevation of Nature to a unified metaphysical entity as the only teacher of farmers; and the elevation of farming into a subject-transforming activity that requires the right philosophy rather than the correct knowledge and techniques. Yet there are also foundational differences. Fukuoka's spirituality, despite its obvious Buddhist inflections, is never named or localized, but based on his personal revelation of a philosophy of "*mu*" (nothingness) which states that "in this world there is nothing at all" (Fukuoka 2009, 8) and that nature is undivided. Within Indian natural farming, this spirituality becomes explicitly Indian. Personal revelation is here replaced by Vedic references and Hindu frames. Compare the following two statements by Fukuoka on nature spirituality with that of Palekar's spirituality (which is the focus of the next section) based on geographical space:

> Plants, people, butterflies, and dragonflies appear to be separate, individual living things, yet each is an equal and important participant in nature. They share the same mind and life spirit. They form a single living organism … Nature is an endless cycle, in which all things participate in the same dance of life and death, living together and dying together. (Fukuoka 2012, 58)
>
> Western philosophers are in very wrong confident mentality that, only they, have absolute truth. But it is not correct. There is only absolute philosophy [and] that is Indian philosophy. (Palekar 2012, 21)

The second major difference is Fukuoka's refusal of nativism. In his decades-long efforts to regenerate deserts and degraded landscapes, he always advocated for finding the best seeds from across the globe. This stands in stark contrast to what I call Indian natural farming's "bionativism" (Münster 2021, S312) that combines explicitly "Indian" spirituality with the need for using exclusively Indian biologies that are constructed as being superior to their non-Indian counterparts, just as Hindu spirituality is superior to non-Hindu faiths. To illustrate this contrast, I next turn to Subhash Palekar, the guru of natural farming with most followers in India and a cultivated obsession with native Indian cows as the spiritual and material foundations of his system (see also Baviskar, this volume).

Subhash Palekar: On Being Native

On the first day of my participation in a training convention for ZBNF in 2014 with Subhash Palekar I could see him eying me on stage. I obviously stood out. The only foreigner in an auditorium with several hundred participants, mostly farmers, but also a large contingent of Anganwadi (female village-level social workers), local

bureaucrats and other interested members of the public. The site was a small town at the foothills of northern Kerala, definitely not on the tourist trail. The convention hall was hot, and the day moved very slowly as every sentence Palekar spoke in English or Hindi was translated into Malayalam. During lunch break of that first day, one of Palekar's inner circle disciples, clad in *khadi*, approached me and said, "Palekarji invites you to see him on stage." I was delighted to accept the invitation as interview appointments with Palekar had been notoriously difficult to set up. On that stage some sofas and chairs were arranged in an approximate circle with Palekar at the center and members of the audience trying to get his attention and ask about specific issues in their fields. One person, who was a big, rich farmer, was eager to show Palekar pictures of his fields on a tablet while another was trying to get a selfie with his guru. When I arrived on stage, to my embarrassment and delight, Palekar cleared the space next to him and asked me to sit beside him. To the great annoyance of everyone else, he spent the next five minutes carefully studying the visiting card I had brought from my home university and listened to my research intentions. During the day I had been intrigued by his insistence that only native Indian cows, *Bos zebu* or *Bos indicus*, had the necessary properties for making his fermented "miracle preparation" for soil rejuvenation. I wanted to know if other cows, and in particular the other branch of the Bos family, *Bos taurus*, that are native to other places could have a useful function there.

Daniel:	Do you think your methodology would also work in northern climates?
Palekar:	Yes, throughout the world.
Daniel:	What about the Himalayas, have you tried it there?
Palekar:	Himachal Pradesh. In South India more than four million farmers are practicing [ZBNF], and ten *lakh* [1 million] in North India.
Daniel:	Would you say that *Bos indicus* is the only useful cow?
Palekar:	Only *Bos indicus is* a cow.
Daniel:	But in other regions there may be other native cows, the Bos taurus may be native to … [interrupts my question, raises his voice]
Palekar:	… the *Bos taurus* is *not a cow*! It is another animal, totally useless!
Daniel:	Not a cow? Not even in other countries, not even for Europe?
Palekar:	Totally useless, not in Europe also, totally useless for Zero Budget Farming.
Daniel:	So it is not that other places have other native cows? There is no native European cow that would…
Palekar:	[even louder now] No native European cow! No European technology! Indian cow! Indian technology only!

Subhash Palekar, born in 1948, holds a BSc in agronomy and is a farmer himself. According to his scattered autobiographical statements, he developed his system

of ZBNF in the years 1989 to 1995 on his farm in his native Maharashtra. He spent these years studying the Vedas, Western sciences, and organic farming methods. Most importantly, he conducted experiments on his farm until he found his system of natural farming and the recipes for his central "miracle preparation," which he calls *jīvāmṛta* (Sanskrit: nectar of life) and *bijāmṛta* (seed nectar) (Münster 2021). On his father's traditionally managed farm, he began introducing new, improved cultivars, fertilizers, and pesticides. After a decade of chemical farming, however, he noticed declining yields. At this point, he realized that his education was a "fraud" and that he would have to do his own research. Remembering his college-year encounters with Adivasi cultivators in the Satpuda Mountains of Maharashtra, Palekar had an epiphany of forests as model nature, or, in his words, as "the totality of nature" that would inspire Natural Farming. "What I saw in the forest [was] a totality of the nature [formed] in my mind. I decided to search and search the totality of nature and get it in the form of Zero Budget Spiritual Farming techniques for every crop" (Palekar 2012, 70). Palekar's narrative is remarkably similar to Fukuoka's epiphany of "nothingness" and an "undivided nature." Other elements of ZBNF equally derivative of the Japanese teacher's method are: no tilling, no chemicals, no human interventions, anti-anthropocentrism, and a propagation of lifestyle changes. However, Palekar departs from or further develops Fukuoka in significant ways. Among these, I will focus first on nativism and second on the relationship of science and spirituality.

As the short exchange between the guru and myself above illustrates, Palekar claims both universality and nativism. His system of natural farming is supposed to have universal validity across climatic zones and country borders. He based this claim on the idea of a unity of a metaphysical "Nature," which operates according to the same agency across the world. In Palekar's words, this Nature is self-developing, self-sufficient, and self-nourishing. The aim of spiritual farming is to activate what is "natural": "That, which is in existence in the Nature and which is activated by Nature is Natural. That which is not in existence in Nature and is activated by human mentality or human intelligence is Unnatural." (Punctuation modified with no change in meaning; Palekar 2011, 114)

Spiritual farmers get "permission" from Nature, to use what is natural, or in "existence in nature." Here he refers mostly to droppings of animals (dung, urine), the activity of insects, worms, and microbes, all of which work together to make his technology, his "miracle preparation" *jīvāmṛta*, effective. Fermenting cow dung, cow urine, and soil microbes produces a concoction that is sanctioned by nature and works on vitalizing soil via the activation of earthworms and other mesofauna as well as soil microorganism, which in turn will be beneficial to soil health and plant growth (Münster 2018). However, when it comes to specifying the "Nature" of natural farming, universality ends. Valid natures need to be native to India. Hence

Palekar's insistence in our dialogue that only *Bos indicus*, the Indian variant of the cow species can be used. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that they are two different species—*Bos taurus* and *Bos indicus*—whereas a biologist would recognize two branches within the same Bos species (which is supported by the ease with which they can be crossbred). *Bos taurus*, the Western or European branch of the cow is rejected as foreign first and as useless second. I conceptualize nativism as type of xenophobia (Hervik 2015) that pits the native against the (devalued) foreign. In Palekar's case this nativism extends to biology and the rejection to nonnative species. My critique of nativism does not deny the possibility of problematic biologies, such as invasive, maladapted, hybridized, or gene modified species, but points to nativism's structural similarity to ideologies of xenophobia, nationalism, and religious chauvinism (Coates 2006). This was the puzzle for me in my above conversation with Palekar, the blend of particularity and universality in declaring the native Indian cow superior over other native cows, even in other countries and that in fact no other native cows exist (or should be called cows), only the Indian ones. This nativism also spills over in the religious or spiritual elements of his teachings: Only Indian philosophy provides the perfect blend of science and spirituality.

In relationship to science, Palekar's spiritual farming offers an ambivalent blend of stark critiques of science, even mockery of the Indian agronomy, and frequent references to advances in ecology, soil science and microbiology in support of his methods. An example of his former approach would be his mocking remarks for agricultural science in India: "We feel great pity with the agricultural science for their great defeat," (2013, 224) referring to resistances developed by insects and fungi to the pesticides and fungicides. Another example would be his renaming of Justus von Liebig, the founder of soil chemistry (see above) as "Mr. Lie Big" who provided the world with what we might call a false ontology of soil and plant growth as largely based on chemical processes. This critique of science establishes an analogy: agronomy to natural farming is like biomedicine "Allopathic medical science" to naturopathy and Ayurveda. Both agronomy and biomedicine are rendered "Western," foreign, and created to exploit Indian farmers. But most foundationally it is a critique of relying on specific measures and indicators of soil health, where a holistic and spiritual approach would be needed. Consider the case of pH value, which determines relative acidity of soil. Palekar explains his discontent with soil sample tests and the scientific reports farmers receive:

> What is that report? In that report, the first line is written that the PH value of your soil is 8.5 or 7.6. What is the meaning of this sentence? What is this PH value? After reading this sentence what instructions or perceptions have you received? Have you experienced about the thirst of the soil, about the pain of the soil, about the hunger of the soil, about the happiness of the soil, about the needs of the soil, wishes of the soil? Nothing! Only one

> word "PH" has been known by you, which has no meaning in the spiritual language. Is this PH a body language of the soil? No. (Palekar 2011, 99)

This is an example of Palekar polemically dismissing basic uncontroversial science with pseudoscientific talk about an anthropomorphized soil that feels pain, experiences thirst and can even be happy or unhappy, and which can be understood only by learning a spiritual language. A more generous reading of Palekar's approach would suggest that he is rejecting reductive applied agronomy and embraces what authors have called the "promicrobial turn" in health and ecology, which have opened the field for ecological conceptions of soil as a composite organism. When it comes to explaining the workings of microbes, symbiosis, rhizospheres he never tires of saying that these principles are scientific and that "we have so much evidence."

The quote above also demonstrates how critique of science is connected to Nature spirituality. Soil (and other non-humans) is rendered a living being with "wishes," "needs," "happiness," and "hunger." In order to live inside what we might call an ontology of living soils, it is necessary, according to Palekar, for farmers to transform their subjectivity. In his call for appreciation of the "body language of the soil," he is not too far from recent methodological innovations in the environmental humanities that call for "attentive interaction" (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 6) with multispecies worlds. Similar to Fukuoka, Palekar teaches a spirituality of what he calls a simple, natural lifestyle, brought about by a transformation of the self. As the following quote shows, this transformation, which comes about by practicing natural farming, is largely based on yogic traditions of self-transformation through renunciation:

> You will be internally changed. Automatically your six enemies or passions or rascals (Shad Ripues) will be controlled systematically. Your bad habits i.e., drinking the liquor, gambling, eating non vegetarian, waist [sic], falsehood, defilement also will be continuously run away from you. Absolute cultivation of mind. Spiritual farming means to overall change you yourself. The internal change and external change simultaneously. (Palekar 2011, 186)

Palekar is referring here to the six enemies of the mind [*shadripu*] found in Hindu scriptures and usually translated as lust, anger, greed, attachment, ego, and envy. Of note here is that spirituality is the outcome of natural farming practice and not vice versa.

In contrast to Palekar, who is an agricultural teacher and farmer first and spiritual guru second, I will next turn to the opposite case: yogic gurus, who have made the environment, sustainable agriculture, and soil care their outreach mission. As my main example I will use Sadhguru, the controversial guru who launched the "Save Soil" campaign in 2022.

The Yoga of Soil: Sadhguru's "Save Soil" Campaign and Raising Planetary Consciousness

Gurus of yoga and meditation play a major role modern and postmodern Indian spirituality and religious practice. While the term "guru" simply denotes teacher who has a long tradition in transmitting Vedic and other religious knowledge in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, I want to focus in this section on yogic gurus with transnational followership and their own techniques of meditation and spiritual growth. I want to mention only two of those gurus, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (born in 1956), and Sadhguru (born in 1957), because both have been active in promoting agroecology and spirituality-based soil care. I will briefly introduce their commonalities and then focus on Sadhguru's "Save Soil" campaign.

One commonality among yogic gurus is that they each have developed (and trademarked) their own technique for meditation which they have taught to followers across the world. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's method is called Sudarsha Kriya Yoga (SKY) and Sadhguru's is called Inner Engineering. These techniques can be, and have been, learned by devotees in courses and workshops across the world. Usually based on meditation and breathing techniques, they share a focus on raising the "consciousness" of their practitioners and so-called mindfulness training. These two gurus also have a transnational organizational structure in common, including a conglomerate of ashrams, training centers, schools, universities, charitable organizations, for-profit businesses, media organizations, non-governmental organizations, health supplement brands, clinics, old age homes and many more. The value of their respective organizations is estimated at several hundred million euros. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar runs the Art of Living (AOL) Foundation, founded in 1981, with headquarters in Bangalore, while Sadhguru is head of the Isha Foundation, founded in 1992, with its headquarters near Coimbatore. These two places are quite different in appearance and function.

The AOL International Center, also called the Art of Living Ashram, is a city within a city, extending over more than one hundred hectares, featuring housing complexes, bookstores, administrative buildings, headquarters for the AOL enterprises, a yoga school, a travel agency, a central meditation building (called Vishalakshi Mantap), a farm and a cattle-breeding compound. According to one resident, roughly sixty thousand people reside there permanently (Plessy 2019, 5). The roads of the Ashram are filled with colorful billboards announcing the "150 scientific reasons for Sudarsha Kriya Yoga" provided by the "Sri Sri Institute for Advanced Research." They are illustrated with drawn pictograms like test tubes, light bulbs, gears, computer screens, happy office workers, upward pointing arrows, and brains. They announce in bold letters, supported by precise numbers, the benefits of SKY for health, mental health and an edge in focus and competitiveness: reduced

menstrual pain (38 percent), reduced stress (28 percent), improved attention span (27 percent), reduced depression (46.75 percent) increased optimism (6.9 times), and a sweeping 69 percent reduction in adult work exhaustion, to name just a few. It is not hard to imagine how this program appeals to upwardly mobile chronically exhausted workers in Bengaluru's IT industry and beyond. Only one billboard is dedicated to "Care for the Environment with SKY." It is illustrated with drawings of wind turbines, solar panels, bicycles, happy people planting trees and recycling waste. It claims precisely 426 percent "increased connectivity with nature," 107 percent "increased concern about the environment," and 111.5 percent "increase in pro-environment choices." I do not have insight into the validity of the data behind these claims. I present them here as a shortcut to put forward a hypothesis about the relationship of gurus to the environment, which certainly requires more research beyond the scope of this chapter. First, environmental campaigns seamlessly fit into corporate greenwashing that is ubiquitous in neoliberal India. Secondly, the connection of yoga and the environment serves to depoliticize ecology by making it a question of attitude and lifestyle choices. In this instance, care for the environment is quite generic and caters to urban consumers. This middle-class environmentalism is easily compatible with a glorification of the Indian past, a feature most visible at the ashram's cattle farm, which is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of native Indian cattle breeds.

Approximately three hundred kilometers south of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Ashram, a gigantic Shiva bust greets visitors at Sadhguru's Isha Center. The 34-meter-high *Adiyogi* Shiva Statue has become a major tourist attraction in the region. It faces a large field, several hundred meters long, which is used for mass gatherings. The most important of these gatherings happens during Mahashivanratri [lit. great Shiva night], a yearly celebration of Lord Shiva, during which devotees stay wake through the night hoping to gain spiritual and health benefits. This is one of the major events organized for paying devotees in the large space in front of the Adiyogi statue, and is a major spectacle with music, performances, a full moon, guided meditation, and inspirational talks that draws crowds from dusk till dawn. Walking several hundred meters beyond the Shiva statue, one reaches the actual buildings of Sadhguru's ashram, which is entered through a large gate that leads to a kind of spiritual theme park in which a bath in swimming-hall sized "energy pools" (*theerthakunds*) and a ten-minute meditation in front of a large Shiva *linga* (*dhyanalinga*) draw the largest crowds of mostly Indian visitors on any given day. The entire tour takes two to three hours, depending on how many activities a visitor books, and at the end the visitors exit through the gift shop.

The entire premises of ashram and statue have been built up over the last decades with money from devotees across the globe. It is situated at the edges of a protected forest, with strong evidence indicating a land grab from the local

Adivasis and ruthless placement onto an elephant corridor essential for wildlife protection. Allegations of dispossession and ecological harm have contributed to Sadhguru's controversial image in India.

In 2022 Sadhguru launched a global "Save Soil" campaign for which he pledged to travel thirty-thousand kilometers, through twenty-six countries alone on a motorcycle. A pedestal in front of *Adiyogi* displays one of his motorcycle helmets and behind it there is a large round cardboard poster with the green Save Soil logo as a reminder of his one-hundred-day journey. In a staff meeting at the beginning of the campaign in 2022, Sadhguru made it clear that most of all he wanted this campaign to be massive in scale, spreading the message of soil health to as many media outlets as possible.

During one of his speeches at the 2024 Mahashivanratri event he claimed to have made three to 3.5 billion people "conscious that there is a threat to the soil and that something has to be done" (Isha Yoga Center 2024). Despite the repeated use of the word "consciousness" in the Save Soil campaign, I could find very little connection to consciousness raising resulting directly from Sadhguru's brand of yoga and meditation program, Inner Engineering. The only connection I found was a ten-minute video clip of guided meditation called "Powerful Meditation to Connect with Soil," (Sadhguru 2022) that features the guru sitting in the dark of night on a chair placed in the open air with trees in the background. He has his eyes closed, chants mantras, and hums a tune. Unfortunately, the video is without explanation, making it difficult to understand how, for Sadhguru, soil health and inner engineering are relevant to each other.

During the Save Soil campaign, consciousness raising seemed to contain little more than repeating to shifting audiences the fact that the soil is endangered and that the world urgently needs to do something about it. The promotional material produced by Sadhguru at the time, while raising the real problem of soil degradation, is full of platitudes such as "The word human comes from the word humus"; "Food doesn't come from Uber Eats, it comes from the soil"; "The healthier your soil, the healthier your food," and of course, the simple repetition of the empty slogan "Save Soil" itself. To be fair, Sadhguru has delivered one high-level policy recommendation suggesting that all countries should commit to preserving 3 to 6 percent of the soil organic matter. However, such a global target seems overly simplistic and does not even require an agroecological transition that would allow for continued agro-industrial extraction (Sharma 2022). The SOM target is, however, indicative of a relationship between science and religion in which a scientized target, a percentage of SOM, is adopted and amplified by a spiritual leader, leaving both spheres, (science or science policy and spirituality) intact, unaffected by each other, and ontologically unchallenged.

For his followers, Save Soil seems first and foremost to be a feel-good campaign. During the 2024 Mahashivanratri mega event, just a few weeks after his return,

standing on the main stage in front of Adiyogi, he asked the thousands of attendees: "Are you a friend of the earth?" to which they replied shouting: "Yeah!"—an answer that seemed to satisfy both the guru and his audience (Isha Yoga Center 2024).

In the outreach material produced by the campaign two aspects of the soil health problematic remain unmentioned. First, we find no allocation of responsibility for the global crisis of soil. There is no mention of land relations, industrial agriculture, the global circulation of food, feed and fuel, or even chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It might even be fair to argue that these gurus do not even speak to actual soil care workers. Hardly any farmers actually battling soil degradation would feel "increased connectivity with nature" by being told: "Get your hands in the soil—not in the dirt as is commonly said, as soil is not dirty" (Sadhguru in IUCN 2022). This messaging is largely aimed at urban elites.

In contrast to Fukuoka and Palekar who arrived at spirituality through farming, for yoga gurus the coming together of spirituality and environmentalism seems to be about influencing and mobilizing people for a good cause. The topics of farming and soil care are arbitrary choices for social outreach and public social messaging. Both the Art of Living Foundation and the Isha Foundation were previously engaged in tree planting activities, also based on quantified targets and a large pool of volunteer workers. These campaigns drew criticism from ecologists for actually doing more harm than good to the environment by planting the wrong trees in the wrong places. Planting trees is arguably another easy to scale-up, feel-good activity that requires neither structural reflection nor spiritual attunement to nature care. This brand of ecological mobilization benefits from the gurus' access to volunteer labor and a global presence of devotees as amplifiers of simple messages. Sadhguru gives the image of his devotes as dormant cicadas that he awoke during his hundred-day trip:

> So by thirteen to fourteen days [into the Save Soil campaign], all these millions of volunteers and supporters who are all over the place, who [were] like cicadas sleeping, by thirteenth or fourteenth day slowly all the cicada woke up, [he raises his hands finger tips touching] and they made the noise [he spreads his fingers], and managed to touch 3.91 billion people in 100 days. (Sadhguru 2024)

While it remains to be seen what topic Sadhguru might put on the future agenda of his spiritual organization for doing good in the world and saving the planet, it seems fair to assume that a good number of dormant donors to his organization may also have been reawakened as a side effect of this campaign to save soil. The Save Soil campaign followed the logic of most types of charitable environmentalism. It had the dual goal of raising awareness about soil among urban consumers and global policy makers, as well as raising activity within the organization and capital for the organization.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented five short portraits of scientists, farmers and spiritual leaders who have brought science and spirituality into the conversation about the agroecological renewal of soil care practices in India and beyond. Taken together this group stages a large range of possible science-spirituality encounters in agro-environmentalism. The relationship between spirituality, science, and pseudoscience is not straightforward and evades easy generalizations. The British scientist Howard, while rejecting the explicitly "spiritual" biodynamic agriculture as pseudoscientific, recognizes the effect of reductive science on what he calls the "NPK mentality," thus making extractive agriculture more than a technoscientific mistake, and a problem of the mind, if not of spirituality. Unsustainable agriculture is produced in a negative feedback loop of bad data and misguided mindsets. The farmers-turned-movement-leaders Fukuoka and Palekar propose natural farming as an antidote to soil loss. They introduce spirituality as a means of connecting with nature. This nature spirituality is Buddhist-inspired in Fukuoka's teaching of the unity of humans and nature, of matter and mind. Fukuoka makes "nature" the farmers' teacher, allowing the farmer to replace a reliance on scientific agronomy with natural farming. Palekar builds on Fukuoka's nature spirituality, but adds an element of nativism and Hindu belonging by connecting natural farming with native Indian cows as a necessary requirement for spiritual soil care. Nature remains the teacher, but it is a situated nature, Indian nature. Spiritual farming here is supposed to draw inspiration from the Vedas and other Indian traditions. Scientific agronomy becomes marked as Western and rendered part of a colonial project that includes also biological and epistemic colonization. In this version the spiritual renewal of agriculture requires a renaissance of ancient Indian knowledge, skills, and spiritualities well as of Indian animal and plant species. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru, finally, represent a case of successful spiritual leaders discovering soil and agriculture as their cause for social outreach. Sadhguru, who is most explicit about soil health amplifies a simplified message about global targets in healthy soil as measured in percentage of soil organic matter. This message is easy to communicate, success is theoretically measurable, and it emulated the logic of climate and other environmental goals negotiated in the global arena. It is a scientized, simplified message spread through existing, yet dormant, networks of devotee-volunteers. Spirituality, however, is not part of the messaging—it is a spiritual organization working for an environmental cause.

I hope to show by this pastiche of ethnographic, literary, and historical instances how the blend of agroecology and spirituality might have the potential to challenge the ontological foundations of extractivist human-environmental relationships. Spiritually informed natural farming, for instance, aims at enacting soil-centric

multispecies agrarian worlds. However, as the material presented here indicates, not all blends of agroecology and spirituality have the same potential impact on soil care practices. Farmers and scientists turning to spirituality or discovering spiritual aspects in their work with soils, plants, and animals (Howard, Fukuoka, Palekar) have to do a much more ontological work at the intersection of science and spirituality with the potential outcome of generating more sustainable practices from the ground up. Spiritual leaders who take on issues of the environment and soil care as part of their social outreach programs have hardly any impact on the ground and may, in fact, contribute to greenwashing in the agricultural sector. Raising awareness for soil, or, in the language of these gurus, raising consciousness about soil, is being translated into a language of policy targets and awareness for middle-class consumers that food grows in the soil. These are low hanging fruits that neither challenge agro-industrial structures because there are any number of ways of increasing soil organic matter, nor does the flashlight of hyped-up attention offer any long-term perspective (spiritual or technical) to small-scale farmers struggling with maintaining soil health in a capitalist food regime.

Notes

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CHAPTER 3

Ecopractices, Self-Realization, and Interpretations of Tradition in a Chinese Ecovillage

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Sunshine Ecovillage in China, an organization striving to address environmental issues through a series of ecopractices for self-realization and interpretations of traditional culture. Initiated and guided by a committed and charismatic leader, the ecovillage promotes practices such as organic farming, meditation, and mindfulness, drawing inspiration from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Members seek to become ecological humans while saving the planet. They integrate individual ecological awakening with collective solutions, aiming to eliminate the dichotomy between humans and nature. By invoking Chinese classical texts and ideas, they carefully handle the relationship between their practices and sociopolitical ideology, serving as an example of the developing eco-movement in rural China.

Keywords: Organic farming, traditional culture, mindfulness, ecological awakening, Confucianism, Daoism

> The ecological human is one who has the ability to save the world and at the same time perfect his or herself. The two are not in contradiction, but completely united. If we want to pull ourselves out of the industrial world, the first step is to return to what it means to be human, we must understand where mankind is situated. The position of humans is between Heaven and Earth, neither higher than Heaven nor lower than the Earth.[1]

This is how one of the ecovillage founders in China, Huang Zheng, has formulated the pivotal role of the ecological human situated between Heaven and Earth in a future sustainable world. In the past decade, a group of ecovillage explorers have emerged in China. Most of them come from a life in one of China's cities resenting what they see as an efficiency-seeking, introspective type of life and work in the cities. Usually these members of ecovillages feel anxious about the destruction of the climate and ecological environment caused by consumerism brought about by today's fast-developing industrial society. They are also worried about their own

lifestyle and their future self-realization in such a society. In Sunshine Ecovillage, or *Sanshenggu shengtaicun* (三生谷生态村) in Chinese, the leader and members are seeking to salvage their mental health, and, at the same time, they aim to save the planet from ecological destruction. Hence, they gather in the countryside and join this ecovillage to seek the realization of becoming an ecological human in the "unity of Heaven and humans" (天人合一), where humans are "neither higher than Heaven nor lower than the Earth," and to explore an ecologically sustainable way of life. The Sunshine Ecovillage, initiated by Huang Zheng in 2015, is one of the earliest international ecovillages in China. Huang Zheng employs ideas and concepts from ancient Chinese philosophy and religions, referred to as "traditional culture" (传统文化) and "Eastern wisdom" (东方智慧) to bolster and legitimize an eco-movement in the mountains in Zhejiang province, China. We do not profess to be able to represent the entire rural ecovillage movement in China with this analysis, but we do believe that an analysis of the conditions in and around Sunshine Ecovillage has real potential to describe and represent aspects of an emerging grassroots eco-movement in rural China, and thus also tell a story about sustainability, transcendence and eco-initiatives in Asia.

Ecovillage construction started in China in the 1990s. Initiated by the central government, it has been mainly concerned with eco-agricultural projects in rural areas and the economic development of townships, serving what is referred to by the government as "rural urbanization" (农村城镇化) and "new rural construction" (新农村建设; Zhang 2012, 13). This diverges from the background of the global ecovillage movement, which is usually regarded to have started in 1995. That year, the Findhorn Community in Scotland held its annual autumn conference on ecovillages and sustainable communities. After the conference, most of these communities started to refer to themselves as ecovillages and formed the Global Ecovillage Network, which linked hundreds of small projects around the world together (Jackson 2004; Joubret and Dregger 2015). In this global context, since the mid-1990s, ecovillages have been understood in terms of four dimensions of sustainable development: social, cultural, ecological, and economic (Bates 2003; Jackson 1998). Sunshine Ecovillage is one of the earliest cases in which these ideas from the global ecovillage movement were brought into practice in China. The founder, Huang Zheng, adopted the framework of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) and joined it formally in 2016, combining its principles with his own interpretation of what he sees as "Eastern wisdom" and "traditional Chinese culture" to explore sustainable ways of living in the contemporary Chinese sociopolitical context. In their ecopractices, the teachers and members of Sunshine Ecovillage rely on selective and hybrid interpretations of excerpts and passages from classical texts, and on ideas from different schools of thought and philosophy in ancient,

pre-modern and early modern China to practice self-cultivation in daily life through meditation, mindfulness, and bodily exercises. A central idea in their practices is "refinement of the mind through practice" (藉事炼心), through which they develop embodied ecological learning and transformation so as to realize the awakened state of what they refer to as the ecological human (生态人) through the power of awareness (觉知). To respond to the global ecological crisis, they invoke the existence of an "Eastern wisdom" current in today's China, inherited from ancient Chinese philosophical and religious traditions. Selective ideas and concepts from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are invoked from ancient texts to attempt at generating an indigenous eco-philosophy in China. Through ideas like "the Way models itself on what is naturally so" (道法自然, translation adopted from *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* 1984, 82) and "the unity of Heaven and humans" associated with different schools of thought in ancient China, a fundamental unity between the individual, the family, the country, and nature at large is ontologically constructed.

In this chapter, we will not engage in-depth with these interpretations of early Chinese philosophy. It suffices here to point to the fact that analyses of the ancient Chinese (mainly fourth and third centuries BCE) concepts of Heaven (天), humans (人), the Way (道) and human nature (性) have a long tradition within sinological scholarship. Scholars' writings expound changing and very complex interpretations of and interrelations between these central philosophical terms (e.g., Graham 1989, 107–37 and 370–82). When Huang Zheng refers to "traditional culture" and "Eastern wisdom," however, what he and others imply is that these invariable concepts, for instance the "unity between Heaven and humans," are the foundation of all main schools of philosophy in China regardless of time and historical development.

Through their interpretation of "traditional culture," Huang Zheng and the members in Sunshine Ecovillage integrate the "ecological awakening" (生态觉醒) of the individual with collective solutions to the eco-crisis, seeking to eliminate the dichotomy both between humans and nature, and between the immanent and the transcendent. In this process, these ecovillage practitioners are, as we will show in this article, also faced with challenges from local villagers, ecovillage visitors and local government officials, and even with frictions between themselves. They need to constantly and strategically employ their interpretation of traditional culture to respond to their individual sense of crisis, to buttress the national ideology, and to explore legitimized ways of practice in the domestic sociopolitical context.

Besides Sunshine Ecovillage, there are several other similar organizations in China, such as Qiandao Lake Ecovillage, Liyang Ecovillage, Shanghai Yungu Farm, and Chengdu Huadao Community. They often have people traveling and exchanging ideas between them, but they also each have their own focus on essential traits in their practices, such as traditional Chinese medicine, organic farming, and

mindfulness. The reason why we chose Sunshine Ecovillage as a case study for this chapter is firstly because it was one of the first to be initiated in China and has persisted to this day. Secondly, the founder and the members of this ecovillage have organized conferences such as the "Sunshine Ecovillage International Ecovillage Forums" in 2015 and 2016, and the "Ecovillage and Eco-civilization Forum" in 2017, thus attracting much international and domestic attention. These forums helped to build a network of people with similar concerns about sustainability in China. Thirdly, it is of interest to observe how the development of Sunshine Ecovillage has gone from internationalization to localization. After initially introducing the Ecovillage Design Education Program (Gaia Education 2012), they have increasingly combined ideas from their interpretation of "traditional Chinese culture" with similar statements about Chinese tradition voiced in official discourse. Over time they have turned their focus to the practices of what they regard as the quintessence of traditional culture in China, while also carefully managing the relationship with neighboring local villagers and the local government. At the practical level, Sunshine Ecovillage promotes learning of eco-knowledge and skills such as vegetarianism, farming, and sustainable design; at the spiritual level, it teaches ideas from the Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist classics mixed with deep ecology and postmodern process philosophy from the West.

Between 2019 and 2024, the authors of this article conducted ethnographic fieldwork combined with textual research in, around and related to Sunshine Ecovillage. We observed the daily work, practices and routines in the village and have conducted interviews with the leader, members, volunteers, visitors, new and old villagers, and government officials in the area. We have become acquainted with these eco-villagers, their ideas, their practices, and their aspirations and frustrations. We have aimed at analyzing their motivations, their solutions, their sources of inspiration, and their spiritual and transcendent practices. We have also sought to better understand the social impact and political implications of their practices, and how an ecovillage of this kind juggles the sociopolitical context in contemporary China. More specifically, we have endeavored to understand how the ecovillage explorers deal with questions of local governance and relationships to neighboring farmers and villagers. Finally, we have also wanted to identify to which extent Sunshine Ecovillage have succeeded in attracting attention and support both domestically and internationally. In this chapter we present and analyze Sunshine Ecovillage as an example of how the eco-movement is developing in China's countryside and what the implications and potential effects of this movement are. More generally, we aim to contribute to an understanding of how otherworldly powers and transcendent ideas are employed and transformed into ecological practices in Asia today.

The History of Sunshine Ecovillage and Its Founder

Sunshine Ecovillage is situated as an integrated part of Xuling village in Qiantan township, Jiande district, administratively governed under Hangzhou city in Zhejiang province. Xuling is a so-called "hollow village" (空心村) not far from Hangzhou, with beautiful natural scenery, but without convenient transport or good infrastructure. It used to be a lively mountain village but today there are only approximately thirty elderly people left. In addition, about thirty new villagers have moved into the village in recent years. According to the villagers' own descriptions and local chronicles, the population began to rise in the 1960s. In the early 1980s, the population peaked at 663 inhabitants (*Xuling Zhi* Compilation committee 2013, 46). After the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening Up (改革开放), with the liberalization of restrictions on urban and rural mobility, the problems of poor transport, lack of job opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and poverty in Xuling village gradually came to the forefront, and the population of the village slowly diminished. The Wahaha Mineral Water Factory started operation in the village in 1994, and employed more than one hundred villagers. However, the factory had closed by 1997 (*Xuling Zhi* Compilation Committee 2013, 93), depriving young villagers of the chance of local employment. The dismantling of the village-run primary school after it was merged into the township's central primary school in 2000, and the implementation of the local government's 2013 initiative to encourage the villagers to relocate to the township of Qiantan to alleviate poverty, all aggravated the process of Xuling's "hollowing out." Young people going out to work to seek opportunities for making a living and get education, and some elderly people going to the city to take care of their grandchildren further exacerbated the loss of population in the village. By 2013, there were nearly six hundred registered villagers but only approximately thirty elderly villagers actually lived in the village at that time. However, Xuling's geographical location and natural environment provide natural conditions for eco-enthusiasts: it is located 418 meters above sea level, surrounded by mountains and rich in wildlife; traffic is inconvenient, there are no factories, and the terraces are not conducive to large-scale mechanized planting and harvesting. The risk of contamination by pesticides and fertilizers is minuscule, and the soil is considered to constitute a good microbiological environment, thus making it an ideal choice of location for the Sunshine Ecovillage, also attracting a small group of new villagers.

The Chinese name of Sunshine Ecovillage, *Sanshenggu* (三生谷) was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the term *sansheng* (三生) refers to the three Chinese terms for ecology, life, and living (生态, 生命, 生活), indicating the goal of ecological practice and living in the ecovillage. The character for the number three, also corresponds to a philosophical concept in the Daoist classic *Daodejing* (道德经) where

Figure 3.1: Xuling Village situated on the side of the terraced mountains where the Sunshine Ecovillage is located. (Photo by Rune Svarverud)

three is expounded as the number that gives birth to all things in nature: "The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures" (*Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* 1984, 103). Finally, the English name Sunshine Ecovillage is adopted presumably because the pronunciation of s*ansheng* in Chinese resembles "sunshine" in English.

Huang Zheng is the main initiator of the organization and is now a mentor, and for all practical purposes, its leader. Born in 1976, Huang Zheng is a former pharmacist who worked for a large pharmaceutical company in Shanghai after graduating from a university in Hangzhou. Dissatisfied with the unhealthy living conditions in big cities, with working for a big enterprise, and with the crisis in the company's operation, he finally chose to leave Shanghai. Huang Zheng and his wife established a tea house in Hangzhou which they ran for more than ten years, while at the same time exploring traditional and ecologically sustainable ways of life in Hangzhou and the nearby countryside. With support from the deputy mayor of Qiantan township in 2015, Huang Zheng initiated Sunshine Ecovillage: he registered it as a social enterprise aimed at solving social problems and promoting public welfare rather than pursuing profit maximization. Due to firm support and recommendations from the deputy mayor, the local government agreed in 2016 to allow Sunshine Ecovillage to use and renovate an old house in Xuling village for that purpose. In the same year, Sunshine Ecovillage successfully joined the GEN and became one of the ten projects enlisted in mainland China (GEN, n.d.). As the ecovillage organization was approved by the government, it had initially formulated an economic cooperation plan with local villagers and regularly organized

activities. After a change of government leadership two years later, however, the new government started questioning this kind of ecovillage design. Since then, Sunshine Ecovillage has had less cooperation with the government and has become more independent, for better or worse, as we return to below. However, the road sign saying "Xuling International Ecovillage" at the foot of the mountain has not been taken down.

Member Enrollment in the Eco Academy

The Eco Academy (生态书院) forms the most important center of activities in Sunshine Ecovillage, through which Huang Zheng promotes his lofty goal of furthering the ecovillage movement in China. This is mirrored in the words of one of their younger members:

> We hope that there will be more and more ecovillages in China, blossoming all over the place, but it's not necessarily us doing it, it's our influence spreading out, or the seeds we scatter … The overall goal is that we hope to spread the ecovillage concept (Xiao Tan).

The Eco Academy is where the members and visitors can meditate, study, practice awareness, and learn about ecology and sustainability. Sunshine Ecovillage is not a large organization. It is usually inhabited only by the founder's family and ten or so more student-members (学员)[2] who live in there year-round. Hundreds of other participants have come on short-term visits for workshops and activities during this time. There are also nearly thirty new villagers living in the surrounding Xuling village, some of whom previously stayed in Sunshine Ecovillage as members, volunteers, and visitors but had left the ecovillage for various reasons. Additionally, some have also learned about the place and have rented houses in Xuling because of the beautiful sceneries marketed through the ecovillage's online promotion material.

Inspired by the Global Ecovillage Network, Sunshine Ecovillage is committed to exploring ways of living and forms of agricultural production that are different from the urban and industrialized world, re-establishing what Huang Zheng regards to be an impaired relationship between human beings and nature. The Eco Academy is the main way to recruit new members. The goal is to nurture its members to become ecological humans, creating a community that can flourish and spread in the future. At its inception, Sunshine Ecovillage recruited large numbers of volunteers to Xuling and gathered a group of practitioners in China who shared a common concern for sustainable development through methods such as traditional Chinese medicine, natural farming, permaculture sustainable design,

Figure 3. 2: The interior of the Eco Academy: A library of books on sustainability and Chinese philosophy, and the Chinese character for "good fortune" (福). On the wall to the right, a classical painting of Confucius. (Photo by Rune Svarverud)

heated *kang*-beds (火箭炕), rammed-mud architecture, mindfulness practice, and eco-leadership development courses. A former volunteer estimated that at its peak in 2016 and 2017, hundreds of people visited this ecovillage each month. Through the richness of practical activities and curriculum design, Sunshine Ecovillage developed and enriched Gaia's four keys of Ecovillage Design Education (Gaia Education 2012, 3). Participants receive an EDE certificate of completion, which Huang Zheng claims is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. From the statistics of past activities, we can see that its curriculum and workshops were rich in its early years, and during the six-month period from March 4 to September 22, 2018, they organized a total of thirty-nine activities ranging from one to seven days each, including workshops, outings, and expert lectures. With the passing of the boom of volunteers and visiting groups during the first two years, as well as the failure to gain the trust of the local leaders in power due to a change of government, and the gradual reduction of visitors due to the restriction of movement of individuals during the pandemic starting in early 2020, the Sunshine Eco Academy has become the center of the ecovillage's practice. To further promote the Eco Academy, Huang Zheng hired an American eco-philosopher, John B. Cobb Jr., and a professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC (National Academy of Governance), Zhang Xiaode, as two honorary deans of the academy.

Since 2019, the academy has been enrolling between ten and fifteen new members per year in its two-to-three-year program and practice, while some people

leave halfway and the number of members who stay for a longer time each year is only around five. So, the number of long-term members in the ecovillage is maintained at around ten to fifteen, mainly young people between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. In addition to joining as an Eco Academy member, there are options for short-term courses and activities posted on social media that people can sign up for according to their personal interests, which also attracts larger groups of visitors. Short- and long-term engagement in Sunshine Ecovillage with its basis in "tradition" is attractive to many discouraged Chinese youths who seek a deeper meaning in life.

> Since childhood, I have been pondering the following: kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, university, job search, promotion, buy a house, buy a car and get married—this resembles people in an assembly line that is called life. We cannot make our own decisions, and we cannot stop. This question has recently been echoing again in my head: what is this life actually for? Perhaps you are someone who is not satisfied with just doing environmental work, taking superficial ecological actions; maybe you hope that there is an ecological organization to promote a truly ecological cause—one with a systematic way of thinking and a vision that makes you want to build an "ecology" and achieve sustainable development. Globalization under the command of Western philosophical and economic theories has brought about global ecological, spiritual, economic, and social crises, while Eastern wisdom contains the most valuable cultural resources for sustainable development (Shutong 2024).

This quotation is taken from the enrollment information for the Sunshine Eco Academy in 2024, when they were about to welcome the sixth group of new Eco Academy members. The ecological crisis is apparently not the only aspect of Sunshine Ecovillage that is attractive to prospective members—so is a personal crisis of the mind (心). That is why the academy also promotes "ways of mind-living" (心活法). Wang Bo, who came to the ecovillage after graduating from university, troubled by the anxieties resulting from long-term studies, disturbing prospects of further education and the job search after graduation, was hoping to find inner peace and mutual respect among people. Shao Long worked in a property company and was tired of the absence of happiness brought about by the pursuit of economic success, so he resorted to mindfulness to feel the happiness of village life. Lingling could not cope with the complexities of human relationships and the "separation of mind and body" (身心分离) caused by work in the city. Yu Nong studied for a master's degree in sustainable development in Paris and worked on it with deep ecological anxiety in Beijing and could not bear to see the destruction of sustainability in urban life. Xiao Bing was betrayed by a business partner and had been penalized for copyright issues, so he engaged in mind-and-body practices and came to terms with himself in natural farming. Over the past eight years, there have been many such cases in the ecovillage, each with their own story about their dissatisfaction

with their previous lives, jobs and selves, and each with their own ideals for an ecologically sustainable future. They all came to this village to explore physical, mental, and ecological sustainability by practices which the ecovillage defines as "Eastern wisdom" inherent in "traditional culture." Strikingly, however, very few of the members of the Eco Academy seem to have come to the ecovillage primarily because of their engagement with ecological issues. Then, what are these practices and perspectives on life that attract youth to Sunshine Ecovillage? In the following we will explore the life, practices, and activities in the ecovillage.

Meditation and Mindfulness: Seeking Awareness in Daily Life Practice

Every morning at 6:30 a.m., members gather on the second floor of the Eco Academy building to meditate. There are forty minutes of sitting meditation with legs crossed on a mat, breathing in the early morning mountain air, and the sounds of the singing bowl (颂钵) like a buzzing in the brain signaling the beginning and end of the meditation. For beginners, the first things they sense are the birdsongs in the mountains, the minuscule movements of insects and small animals, the flowers and trees in the wind and rain, then the air around them, their own body, blood, breath, and heartbeat, and their deepest thoughts, and finally, some fatigue at the end of the session. At the end of the meditation session, passages from one of the ancient Chinese classics are read aloud in unison. There are also members of the academy who arrange their own time and place to meditate for another thirty to sixty minutes every day to train their awareness. When Xuling's elderly villagers observe this kind of behavior, they often assume that the academy members are performing some kind of illicit religious ritual and feel worried and suspicious.

Huang Zheng referred to mindfulness as a "deliberate, present-focused, non-judgmental awareness," during the opening ceremony of the Eco Academy in 2024. Obtaining awareness is one of the goals of the practices at Sunshine Ecovillage—the perception of one's present state of body and mind. In addition to having a teacher to guide them during meditation, the academy also offers the participants many workshops involving mindfulness, such as playing the ancient Chinese music instrument *guqin* (古琴), attending "immanent life (内在生活) camps," hiking, and taking part in reading clubs, in order to train their awareness through self-mastery and collective learning and practice. After morning meditation, they often practice *qigong* (气功) or other mind-body exercises, and then the day starts with a mindful introduction to breakfast.

> The growing of rice and of grain—think of it whenever you dine; remember how silk is obtained, which keeps you warm and looks fine. Don't pick and choose what you eat, and

> don't eat too much. I am grateful to Heaven and Earth for nourishing all things, to my country for nurturing and protecting me, to my parents for raising me, to my teachers for guiding me diligently in my learning, to my classmates for caring for and helping me, to the farmers for working hard, and to my fellow members for cooking with care. I will be aware of my posture and breathing and of my chewing and swallowing. I live in the here and now. I am grateful! (Pre-meal words of thanksgiving—mindfulness breakfast)

The mindfulness breakfast takes place after members have chanted the above words of thanksgiving in chorus. The content of these words of thanksgiving incorporates food conservation, valuing of labor, Confucian benevolence and filial piety, patriotism, and training of awareness.

Mindfulness serves as the central value of education in the ecovillage. Huang Zheng is critical of the unsustainable way of life brought about by the endless pursuit of money and the efficiency of industrialism and consumerism and sees the global ecological crisis as the result of what he calls the "efficiency society" (效率社会). The solution he proposes is to focus on ecology, life and living (三生), and in that way cultivate the individual to become an ecological human representing the unity of Heaven and humans. Through mindfulness and meditation, Huang Zheng offers a venue for the members to interact with the eco-values in Chinese tradition and at the same time tackle issues of personal distress and anxiety. Reaching this status requires not only to study texts on "traditional culture" through books in the classroom, Huang Zheng claims, but also includes the need for embodied practice in daily life achieved through "refinement of the mind through practice" (藉事炼心).

Refinement of the Mind through Practice: Cooking and Farming

Life and practice in the ecovillage are not always a walk in the park. The lack of supplies and personnel, organizing activities to cope with the crowds of people coming and going, and the collaboration and cooperation among the members often put a lot of strain on the members. For example, in this kind of communal living, the problem of a dozen or so people taking turns cooking causes difficulties for the members, and if there are guests and team visits, the members whose turn it is to cook will face even greater pressure. Sometimes there are also members who simply forget their duties to cook and at other times there are a lack of ingredients for cooking, adding to the tensions. Some of the short-term volunteers complained directly about the unfairness of this kind of rotation and the chaos of management, and some even left for this reason; there were also members who had a hard time tolerating the filthiness of the communal space caused by the rotation of duties. The thanksgiving words to "fellow members for cooking with care" in

the morning introducing the mindfulness breakfast reflect that situation. For some older members, the difficulties encountered in daily life can be more easily resolved by performing what they refer to as "refinement of the mind through practice." Xiao Tan, who has been living in Sunshine Ecovillage for more than three years, responded to these challenges by saying that "this resistance of the mind must be resolved through mental training … because the pressure does not come from the fact that one has to cook for forty people, it comes from fear."

In fact, everything can be used as a practice. The refinement of the mind through practice means, to them, to internalize the problems encountered by individuals and by the collective, and to turn it into an enigma of one's state of mind. It is explained as nothing other than resolving conflicts and difficulties in real life by regulating one's mindset and motivating the individual to devote themselves to altruistic action. This method regards all events as practices of the mind, including cooking, attending classes, and dealing with disputes between mentors and students. "If you walk into the kitchen one day with resistance, it is a sign that you have not practiced enough. You need to be able to seize this mindset and put conflicts aside." This is how Xiao Tan explains the mental state when dealing with such issues. In the dining room on the ground floor of Sunshine Ecovillage, there is a sign on the wall with the Chinese characters for "refinement of the mind through practice" that continuously reminds guests and members of its significance.

In addition to communal living, everyone in the ecovillage is individually responsible for a project, such as the running of the Eco Academy, group receptions, natural farming, plant dyeing, and tea-making. All of these projects are important to the life of the ecovillage, especially when the members in charge change due to turnover. These projects not only provide a certain income for the operation of the organization, but are also important for the practice of the mind of each participant.

The Sunshine Ecovillage farm is situated at the foot of the Xuling Mountain, a twenty-minute drive down the mountain from the village. The farm has approximately fifteen acres (ninety *mu* 亩) of land where they practice natural farming (自然农法). "Not watering and instead waiting for the rain, not fertilizing the soil but leaving it to itself, not weeding but leaving the crops [to grow] in symbiosis with the weeds, stimulating the potential of the vegetables themselves, and focusing on letting the Way (道) follow its natural inclination," is the ideal method of natural farming, a member once told us. However, this way of farming is often labor intensive and requires much patience, especially in the terraced land surrounding the village. Academy member Wang showed us an obsolete rice mill and the bellows that Sunshine Ecovillage still uses to separate chaff and we spent that afternoon milling rice and chatting. The use of this kind of semi-manual equipment has been largely phased out by the local farmers, and large-scale cultivation at the foot of the

mountains uses more advanced mechanized equipment. On one of those days when there were more visitors to the ecovillage, Wang was busy milling rice for visitors' dinner. During the check-out session in the evening, he shared his feelings about being exhausted after a whole day's work. But Huang Zheng explained that the feeling of exhaustion comes from the mind rather than from the hard work itself. These feelings of exhaustion should be assuaged by refining the mind during work.

As one of the vehicles for mind cultivation, natural farming has spread outward from the ecovillage, also influencing new villagers who have left Sunshine Ecovillage due to their disapproval of the way it is organized. Xiao Bing is a former member who wanted to establish his own ecovillage at the foot of Xuling Mountain, combining natural farming with traditional Chinese medicine. He explained his approach as "either ensuring that people do not get sick, or that they go through natural healing if they have become sick." One younger local villager, Hu Yue, after seeing that the ecovillage farming method has produced better yields that sell for higher prices, has started to emulate their farming method. He now runs his own agriculture company with organic farming in a nearby village.

Natural farming as a way of refining the mind in Sunshine Ecovillage has its footing in how "traditional Chinese culture" is interpreted, especially in the cultivation philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. With the help of the Confucian philosophy of cultivating oneself in daily life, the Daoist philosophy of non-action (无为), and the Buddhist philosophy of overcoming greed, anger, and stupidity, the idea of refining the mind through practice combines inner cultivation with practical ecology. Huang Zheng places special importance on Buddhist philosophy when promoting natural farming as a way of refining the mind, thus mitigating the current ecological crisis.

The approach in Sunshine Ecovillage of refining the mind through farming and cooking practices that has been honed for eight years not only helps maintain the project operation of the ecovillage but also responds to the difficulties and frictions that occur in the eco-villagers' life. Cooking and farming are necessary to keep the daily life in the ecovillage running with supplies and for putting food on the dinner table. In addition, turning conflicts to a question of mindset helps resolve immediate tensions between members and may give them a key for handling social relations later in life. Natural farming has even had a positive effect on the local market for farm produce in the area. For example, local villagers have reduced the use of herbicides and chemical fertilizers since Sunshine Ecovillage only purchases their herbicide-free walnuts. By employing local villagers and selling agricultural products at high prices, Sunshine Ecovillage has shown neighboring farmers the economic feasibility of ecological farming. Some new villagers in Xuling have even adopted some of the concepts of mental practice from Sunshine Ecovillage, such as mindfulness and awareness, and applied them to their own lives.

The Ecological Human and Ecological Awakening: Attaining "Unity of Heaven and Humans"

The epitome of ecological awakening and mind refinement is when one is able to reach the state of an ecological human. Huang Zheng's status in Sunshine Ecovillage is both that of a spiritual mentor and of a leader of the organization. In fact, his role as spiritual mentor in the ecovillage cannot be overestimated. Although he often stresses the need to decentralize his position, almost all the members and visitors come here because they are inspired by the ecovillage's international and domestic online promotion staged by him. He is considered by a member to be "strong in energy" (能量强) and "good in cultivation" (修为好). When members are confused in life or worried about the future, they seek him for guidance.

At Sunshine Ecovillage, Huang Zheng attributes his "strong energy" to his own ecologically awakened state and trusts that through the years of living and practicing in the ecovillage, more and more people will come to attain this state. The practices, learning, and cultivation in the ecovillage are all paths to ecological awakening. Even though the ecovillage draws on Confucian classic texts and religious scripts from Buddhism and Daoism, he believes that ecological awakening is a new form of enlightenment for people in this era of ecological crisis. It is different from the enlightenment brought about by religions that rely on personal attachments to a God or an institutionalized setting. Eco-awakening is based in what he sees as a traditional Chinese cultural understanding of the relationship between Heaven, Earth, and humans (天地人), and is only attainable through the ecological human. Huang Zheng once drew an analogy between the two: "Religious awakening is called enlightenment, and the other is eco-awakening. Through the latter, one can give up everything to help the world mitigate the ecological crisis." The ecological human is "one who has the ability to save the world and at the same time perfect himself or herself. The two are not in contradiction, they are complete and united (合一)."

However, the ecovillage and Huang Zheng's ideas about ecological awakening also face skepticism and critique. Members question why everyone has to work so hard without any extra income, and some have difficulties adapting to this kind of community life. At the same time, the local government and elderly villagers are suspicious of the eco-villagers' motives. As a result, Huang Zheng has advanced himself to the center of public attention in social media and promoted the practices of the ecovillage for a broader online audience to bolster the legitimacy of Sunshine Ecovillage. In the following section we discuss how he and the other members appropriate the concept of "traditional culture," thus tapping into the current political discourse to cope with their crisis of legitimacy.

Transcendence for Distrust and Legitimacy

As early as June 2003, Xi Jinping, then Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, promoted a project called "A thousand villages as models, ten thousand villages to be renovated" (千村示范, 万村整治), which represented the initiation of the "Green Rural Revival Program" (千万工程). Ten thousand or so administrative villages were selected from across Zhejiang province to undergo comprehensive improvement, and one thousand or so villages were to be turned into well-off model villages. The program's overall aim was to renovate and develop villages in the countryside and focus on rural pollution control and ecological protection and restoration (Wang, Pang, and Li 2024). Xuling became one of these villages. After Xi Jinping's presidency in 2012, the experiences from Zhejiang's Green Rural Revival were promoted to develop the countryside all over the country (Gao and Zhou 2024; Xinhua News Agency 2024).

Against the backdrop of the local government's poverty alleviation and several investment projects in Xuling, Sunshine Ecovillage was initiated in the context of the Green Rural Revival program. Huang Zheng initially planned to develop the whole village's collective economy and share future profits. However, that project was never fully endorsed by the local government. Additionally, both local villagers in Xuling and the government gradually began to question this ecovillage project that does not invest on a large scale and does not produce economic benefits for participants and the community. The ecovillage did not meet the local government's economic expectations as part of the Green Rural Revival program. Some local elderly villagers also considered the promotion of meditation, vegetarianism and Confucian, and Daoist and Buddhist practices in Sunshine Ecovillage to be illicit religious activities. Through interviews we have learned that the local government and villagers are wary of this kind of ecovillage organization. Hence, the ecovillage has faced a growing number of challenges to its legitimacy and Huang Zheng has had to organize workshops with greater care and explore ways to better legitimize his own ecological discourse and the ecovillage's practices.

Sunshine Ecovillage has had to be especially careful about courses involving spiritual and religious content. Ideas and practices inspired by religious traditions cannot be promoted through open courses, only through individual guidance, and thus the Eco Academy arranges courses and holds workshops under the rubric of "traditional culture." Sunshine Ecovillage has endeavored to interpret religious and spiritual texts and messages in a secular way in order to avoid coming into conflict with state ideology. In fact, these texts and passages interpreted as part of China's glorious past often link up with national ideology. On January 18, 2017, in a speech at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Xi Jinping mentioned that "we should follow

the concepts of the unity of Heaven and humans, and the (Daoist) concept of the Way, following what is natural, and thus seek the path of sustainable development" (Xi 2017). In 2017, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued a whitepaper entitled "Suggestions on the Implementation of the Project of the Inheritance and Development of the Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture." This paper takes the promotion of what is referred to as "outstanding traditional culture" (优秀传统文化) as an important Chinese cultural feat to enhance national soft power and achieve national rejuvenation (Xinhua News Agency 2017). Hence, in recent years, Huang Zheng has shifted from EDE theories and postmodern process philosophy to a more grounded emphasis on "traditional Chinese culture," which is in line with the Communist Party's official discourse, and therefore helps to alleviate the ecovillage's legitimacy crisis.

In Sunshine Ecovillage, Chinese "traditional culture" and "Eastern wisdom" as interpreted from selective and partial readings of ancient Chinese texts, take the shape of a dichotomy in the East-West relationship. The West is characterized by its former glory based on an industrial development that spread pollution, while China, the East, the Orient, represents the future and a promise for "a community with a shared future for mankind." Following the opening ceremony of the Eco Academy in 2024, Huang Zheng organized a roundtable about "Living Out the Eastern Wisdom" in which the founder, the honorary dean, and the authors of this chapter participated. In a discussion about education East and West, Zhang Xiaode, the honorary dean, claimed:

> Education under Western industrial civilization is about rational thinking with the aim of pursuing the truth and to paying attention to usefulness. In that way knowledge is turned into a tool that transforms into the power to conquer and transform the world; Chinese wisdom, on the other hand, is meant to seek inward, to let one's heart communicate with the universe. To solve current problems, we need not knowledge and tools, but an interaction between humans and nature.

These perspectives on the glory of an ancient Chinese ecological past with promises for a global future bolster Chinese nationalism and nativism in the face of what appears as dwindling hopes for a global solution to the current ecological crisis. Chinese eco-enthusiasts are searching for consolation in native education based in spiritual and philosophical texts formed during China's axial age. At the same time, this serves to alleviate the legitimacy crisis of the ecovillage in their practices and orientation.

Conclusion

Faced with the current global environmental crisis, Prasenjit Duara proposes to revisit alternative Asian traditions to seek more viable cosmological foundations for sustainability (Duara 2015, 2; and in the introduction to this volume). China's religious texts and traditional philosophies are not lacking in ideas and concepts that may be employed in contemporary work for sustainability, as we have shown in this chapter. In Sunshine Ecovillage, the ultimate authority for ecological protection resides in the self-realization of an ecological human. Our aim has been to understand how ancient texts about China's cosmological foundations are (re)interpreted, romanticized, and put into practice in the context of an ecovillage like Sunshine. We have furthermore addressed questions of the social impact and political implications of these practices in Sunshine Ecovillage and have endeavored to identify key aspects of the rural ecovillage movement in China through this case study.

Throughout years of practice in Sunshine Ecovillage, Huang Zheng has endeavored to embed elements of what he terms "Chinese traditional culture" into GEN's ecovillage designs. In this vision, the practices they have established in Sunshine Ecovillage are precisely the way they imagine people must have lived in harmony with nature in ancient times. He endeavors to discover and put into practice the ideas of sustainable development that he finds in many strands and texts of Chinese traditional cosmologies, especially in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. The idea of an idealized ecological human is at the core of the ecovillage's endeavors to cultivate individuals to guide in rescuing the world from environmental destruction, not unlike a Confucian sage or a Buddhist Bodhisattva.

Through this deployment of otherworldly powers and authority, Huang Zheng and his fellow eco-villagers can find refuge from the apprehensions of urban life and at the same time introduce newcomers to what is claimed to be sustainable ways of living in harmony with the forces and elements of nature. In the process of "living out traditional culture," the Sunshine Ecovillage practices do not simply mark a bodily return to the traditional Chinese countryside, but a creation or even invention of a tradition-inspired life secluded from urban agonies. Different from other city-dwellers who have sought a better life in rural China, the Sunshine ecovillagers emphasize the added value of "refinement of the mind through practice." Indeed, even if those who left the ecovillage mostly returned to their previous social lives, the majority acknowledged the positive impact of the experience of "spiritual healing" on their subsequent lives, and some have even gone on to start ecovillage experiments of their own elsewhere.

Although the specific interpretation and understanding of what is implied in traditional culture among the members may deviate from that of Huang Zheng, and even if some members leave the village due to disagreements over ideals, the goal

of sustainable development is unanimously shared among the ecovillagers, with Huang Zheng serving as their spiritual guide as well as the leader of the activities and of the running of the daily business of Sunshine Ecovillage. Besides leading members in ecological practices through self-cultivation, Huang Zheng attaches great importance to the promotion of the beautiful natural landscape in Xuling and the ecological ideas of Sunshine Ecovillage. He invites every foreign guest to record an introductory video of the ecovillage in their local language, hoping to attract people from all over the world to visit. He often utilizes live streaming and video recording to showcase the daily activities, such as the tea-making process, the Eco Academy opening ceremonies, ecological village conferences, as well as workshops and lectures, so that more ecological enthusiasts can witness them and be attracted to the village. Hence, even if Sunshine Ecovillage represents the practice of a relatively small group of people, it has become an important arena for exploring and developing ecological and sustainable forms of rural living in contemporary China.

Notes

[1] Citations without references were gathered during fieldwork and are unpublished sources.

[2] In the following we use the word 'members' to designate both students who currently studying in the academy and former students who have finished education in the academy while still living and practicing in the ecovillage.

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CHAPTER 4

Hòa Hảo Buddhism and the Target of Net-Zero Plastic Waste in the Mekong Delta

Nhung Lu Rots

Abstract

Rivers and waterways in the Mekong Delta have become choked with plastic. To address this crisis, Hòa Hảo Buddhism has joined forces with local and national authorities. Devotees mobilized to act against pollution and to reach net-zero plastic waste; lay teachers propagated a green Dharma based on their founder's teachings; and Hòa Hảo leaders formed political networks with state actors. Thus, the plastic crisis has provided Hòa Hảo Buddhism a good opportunity for religious revival after being long marginalized in the Vietnamese religious landscape. The chapter argues that while Hòa Hảo actions have been instrumental in raising environmental awareness, they have been less successful in transforming devotees' behaviours towards sustainable consumption, let alone a future of net-zero plastic waste.

Keywords: Carbon-neutral, zero waste, green Dharma, environmental awareness, religious minorities, legitimacy.

Introduction

In recent years the rivers and waterways in Vietnam's Mekong Delta have become choked with plastic. Plastic waste blocks water flows, suffocates aquatic plants and animals, contaminates water and soil, and causes small-scale environmental disasters across the region.[1] In response, the religious leaders and followers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism have joined forces with local and national authorities to raise environmental awareness and clean up polluted areas.

Hòa Hảo is a Vietnamese Buddhist religious movement that was founded in 1939 by Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ in Hòa Hảo village, Tân Châu district, Châu Đốc province.[2] The current name of the place is Phú Tân Commune, An Giang Province. It is known as the religion's birthplace, and is an important pilgrimage site in the delta. Rooted in the regional colonial context, Hòa Hảo stands out as a new religion, blending nationalism, ancestor worship, and Buddhism (Taylor 2001).

The Hòa Hảo religion was first associated with the millenarian sectarian movements in southern Vietnam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tai 1983; Do

2003; Nguyễn 2017). During the First and the Second Indochina Wars (1939–1975), several Hòa Hảo communities mobilized resources for their own military units and armed forces (Haseman 1976). Their believers had become influential nationalists and activists, and for this reason, the religion was caught up in conflicts with several political regimes in the South. After the wars (1975–1999), the Hòa Hảo religious organization was abolished following its previous opposition to the communist forces (*Việt Minh*; Tran 2003). On June 11, 1999, the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) issued Decision No. 21/QĐ/TGCP to acknowledge the organization and activities of the Central Executive Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism (*Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo*; henceforth CEC). Since then, the religion has operated based on the principles of the CEC and its network of priests and lay teachers.[3] In its search for a religious revival, Hòa Hảo Buddhism has addressed the plastic crisis in the Mekong Delta as a means for gaining political legitimacy.

This chapter offers an analysis of the methods and strategies employed by Hòa Hảo Buddhist leaders to address the current plastic waste crisis. It seeks to answer two main questions: How have leaders and laypeople responded to this waste crisis? And, how does Hòa Hảo engagement with nationwide environmental programs and campaigns help local residents cope with their daily challenges, which include not only plastic pollution, but also social and political restrictions facing their religion? I hypothesize that Hòa Hảo engagement with waste problems in recent years not only constitutes a response to local environmental problems, but also widens the space for their devotees to increase their religious influence across the country. Consequently, this chapter argues that the plastic waste crisis and national environmental campaigns for solving this crisis present good opportunities to this religious organization for the revival of their tradition.

My research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in 2022 and 2023. Over a total of nine months, I participated in numerous religious ceremonies and festivals in the Mekong Delta, where I observed local involvement with plastic and waste. In addition, I worked as a volunteer at the An Hòa Tự temple near the headquarters of the CEC. In total, I have interviewed twelve leaders, head priests, lay teachers, as well as forty lay members and waste management officers who have experience with plastic problems and have suggested solutions to the waste crisis.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, I analyze the leaders' narratives explaining why they joined state-led environmental programs. In the second, I discuss the methods employed by these leaders to raise environmental awareness and mobilize volunteers among the Hòa Hảo communities in the Mekong Delta. In the third, I contrast these objectives with local grassroots initiatives. I argue that there is a tension on the ground between environmental concerns and popular notions of Buddhist merit generation that prevent lasting behavioral change.

Finally, I conclude that the leadership's concern with environmental issues has contributed to the current resurgence of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, but that the ideal of a zero-plastic society has not been achieved.

Religious Narratives and Hòa Hảo Top-down Participation in National Environmental Campaigns

From 2015 to 2020, the Vietnamese state implemented a new series of environmental policies. State actors have launched environmental campaigns and enlisted a number of religious groups to participate in these programs, asking them to develop their own action plans. The government also encouraged faith-based communities to develop local initiatives for environmental protection. The CEC participated actively in some of these projects. The chair of the committee claimed that environmental concerns were at the heart of the Hòa Hảo religious philosophy. Therefore, he suggested, protecting the environment was an ideal spiritual practice on the path toward personal liberation.

In 2015, a nationwide environmental campaign was launched and led by the Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee (Trung Anh 2016).[4] It was called the "Promotion of the Role of Faith-based Organizations in Environmental Protection and Climate Change Responses," which was then shortened to the "Religion and Environment." Interested groups have been encouraged to sign and participate. On December 2, 2015, leaders of fourteen religious groups were invited to a national conference in Huế. At the conference, the chair of the CEC presented a paper titled "Hòa Hảo Buddhism: Environmental Protection Is a Duty" (Dạ Yến 2015). One can grasp the idea of Hòa Hảo duty from his speech (CEC 2018):

> The Charter of Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church [*Giáo hội*] orients our lay members and their religious practices based on the principal "For the Dharma, for the nation." These practices include studying Buddhism, cultivating self-awareness, and fulfilling the Four Debts of Gratitude … The ideal practice of Hòa Hảo self-cultivation is to explore supreme beliefs that generate merits, and by all means bring benefits [*phước lợi*] to all sentient beings. Sentient beings [*chúng sanh*] include humans and [other] living species that need to rely on each other in order to survive and thrive. Hòa Hảo Buddhism respects and inherits the Buddhist tradition. In modern language, human beings must maintain biodiversity for a peaceful life and for sustainable development. In summary, the lifestyles of Hòa Hảo adherents are not separated from [their] normal lives. They have duty to protect the environment, assure safety, and strive toward sustainability.

The speech rearticulated traditional teachings using the language of contemporary environmentalism. First, the leader aligned the duty of environmental protection with one of the most important tenets of Hòa Hảo life and thought, "The Four Debts of Gratitude" (*Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*). This tenet asks worshippers to be grateful to our parents and ancestors; to be grateful to our country; to be grateful to the Triple Jewel (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha); and to be grateful to our fellow Vietnamese citizens and to humanity as a whole. Cultivating environmental awareness and engaging in environmental protection are righteous actions for paying back the four debts and bringing benefits to humanity and all other living species.

As the speech unfolded, the CEC's chair linked the Hòa Hảo spiritual objectives to sustainable development goals. Their shared objective, he said, was "to maintain biodiversity for a peaceful life" (CEC 2018, 18). As part of this objective, the head of Hòa Hảo was attempting to connect the goal of sustainability to the moral practices of Hòa Hảo devotees. In order to achieve a rebirth in the Pure Land, Hòa Hảo adherents are supposed to behave in a moral manner that is inspired by their perception and reflection of the physical world (Brown 2024). A balanced and peaceful physical world will, supposedly, influence their reflexivity and thus have a positive impact on their spiritual goals. In other words, worshippers can achieve a Pure Land rebirth by cultivating their own sustainable behaviors. The leader justified this association by stating that "Hòa Hảo Buddhism respects and inherits the Buddhist tradition," and he tried to protect himself from possible criticism from other Hòa Hảo groups by claiming that these ideas are inherited from the Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination (King 2009, 13).[5]

There are, in practice, several active Hòa Hảo groups who disagree with the CEC's new interpretation of Hòa Hảo scriptures, its principal "For the Dharma, for the nation," and especially its governance in seeking compromises with the Vietnamese state (Bourdeaux 2022, 881). However, the CEC, whose headquarters are in the An Hòa Tự Temple in Phú Tân, is currently the officially recognized Hòa Hảo group in Vietnam. It has also been the only management organization of the tradition that arranges religious activities and maintains its official relations with local and national authorities.[6] Since 1999, the CEC has rewritten the Hòa Hảo scriptures and promoted a social and religious identity based on charity and volunteerism (Vo 2020). The scriptures were first written by Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ, who used poems, verses, and literature texts to build a Hòa Hảo Buddhist Canon (*Sấm Giảng*) between 1939 and 1947. Claiming to be the reincarnation of the Living Buddha Master of Western Peace (*Đức Phật Thầy Tây An - Đoàn Minh Huyên*) from the mid-nineteenth century, Huỳnh Phú Sổ gained popularity and attracted followers using the same methods as the Living Buddha Master: predicting apocalyptic events, preaching religious philosophy, and healing a large number of people (Taylor 2001; Tai 1983). Like other religions within the millenarian tradition, Hòa Hảo worshippers believe

in the idea of the Dragon Flower Assembly (*Hội Long Hoa*), a selection process for salvation on Judgment Day, when morally pure believers will be liberated from suffering after their Pure Land rebirth.

According to the narrative of the chair of the committee, "the ideal practice of Hòa Hảo self-cultivation" is to explore the ultimate beliefs in the Dragon Flower Assembly belief, which were prophesized by the founder and earlier religious pioneers (i.e., the Living Buddha Master). Vo Duy Thanh (2020, 42) summarizes the apocalyptic myth as "the appearance of the Future Buddha, Maitreya, also called the King of Light, or Minh Vương, who would be sitting on a lotus throne to convene the Dragon Flower assembly, where only morally pure people who had survived the apocalypse would gather" (see also Tai 1983, 28). In order to reach salvation and achieve liberation, worshippers fulfill the four debts, carry out uncomplicated rituals with simple offerings at home, live according to the founder's teachings, and generate Buddhist merits by doing charity and practicing good deeds. Importantly, the leader suggests that their spiritual journey nowadays crucially includes the duty of living sustainably and protecting the environment.

The chair of the CEC has also associated the modern language of climate change and other environmental issues into the Hòa Hảo "supreme beliefs" that are centered on apocalyptic events. Hòa Hảo religious pioneers had predicted a series of natural disasters and misfortunes such as droughts, earthquakes, cataclysms, crop failures, famines, and mass deaths. It was said that these environmental catastrophes would precede the appearance of the Future Buddha, who will descend on the sacred Forbidden Mountain (Núi Cấm). Thanks to the association, the leader brought environmental concerns into the center of Hòa Hảo philosophy and beliefs. This paved the way for new religious practices as environmental actions came to be seen as a means to generate Buddhist merit and, consequently, to achieve personal liberation from worldly suffering.

The speech, thus, represents the "green turn" that has taken place within Hòa Hảo Buddhism since 2016. In response, the Hòa Hảo communal executive committees have been active in mobilizing volunteers to solve pressing environmental problems, especially the current crisis of plastic pollution. The online channels of many local and national newspapers have showed Hòa Hảo environmental engagement. They have taken part in various collective activities, joined environmental campaigns to say no to plastic bags at markets, and cleaned pesticides and plastic bottles in rice fields (Lê Hùng 2021). In fact, in the last few years, the Mekong Delta's rivers and waterways have become dumping places for plastic and waste. People use organic waste on their farms and gardens but dispose of solid waste in open watersheds. Waste flows into the river and canal systems and then into the ocean. The fluidity of the water helps to push the waste out of sight and out of mind. But not all waste and plastic end up in the sea. Due to the delta's low elevation, tidal

waves push them back to the terrestrial environment, turning beaches and river mouths into landfills (Rots and Lu Rots 2023).

Because local waste collectors have failed to clean up solid waste and plastic in open dumping places, local and national authorities have joined forces with civil society organizations to deal with the crisis. Many organizations and religions have set up volunteer groups to clean up the polluted areas. Hòa Hảo, in particular, has mobilized volunteers to take part in collective action such as sorting organic, solid, and plastic waste; cleaning up polluted areas and public spaces; planting flowers and trees to create beautiful landscapes; and protecting clean water areas from waste and litter (Trần Thắng 2020, 2022). The chair of the CEC has initiated several local campaigns in Phú Tân, encouraged followers to stop littering in rivers and canals, and distributed rubbish bins to households to separate organic and solid waste (CEC 2017). He also developed a homemade recipe to turn organic waste into fish feed.

Other members of the CEC have refrained from using plastic bags and asked their family members to take baskets made of hard plastic or in alternative materials to the market instead of taking single-use plastic bags from sellers. In addition to raising environmental awareness of plastic use through education, Hòa Hảo leaders have encouraged their followers to make baskets from grass and water hyacinths. These plastic-free products are distributed by volunteers in supermarkets, farmer's markets, consumer fairs, and shopping malls.

Hòa Hảo volunteers have also targeted other harmful waste to the environment (*rác thải độc hại*) such as agricultural substances and pesticides. In these volunteer campaigns, villagers are encouraged to walk around their paddy fields to collect pesticide bottles that are scattered around by the farmers who have used them. After being collected, these bottles are buried in holes or wells. Most local environmental initiatives needed approval from the CEC and the Vietnam Fatherland Front before each operation (Vietnam Fatherland Front 2021).

When the program Religion and Environment was approaching the end of its first stage in late October 2019, the leaders of 43 religious groups signed a new commitment to continue the program until 2030, anticipating international support with the presence of the Nordic Assistance to Vietnam at the signing ceremony (Vietnam Fatherland Front 2019). At the ceremony, a Hòa Hảo temple in Cần Thơ City received a national prize from the Vietnam Fatherland Front for its model "waste management, waste processing plant, tree planting, and fire extinguishing" in December 2019 (Tuấn 2019). The CEC has introduced this model to many Hòa Hảo temples and villages in the Mekong Delta. Thanks to the initiative, another temple in Tân Hòa, Hậu Giang Province received a provincial prize for their model of "waste segregation" (*Hậu Giang Newspaper* 2021).

Built on the success of the first stage of Religion and Environment, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment suggested a new scheme to the prime minister, who launched another national action plan to tackle plastic waste (Prime Minister's Office 2019). The new action plan stipulated different ways to deal with plastic, which also changed the environmental leadership among Hòa Hảo communities. The leaders continued to participate in the program, but with a new viewpoint depending on the geographic locations of their communities.

Since 2019, marine pollution has emerged as the new focus of national action plans. Vietnam aims to reduce plastic in the ocean by 50 percent in 2025, and by 75 percent in 2032 (Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2020, 9). This new target, pollution in the ocean (*rác thải nhựa đại dương*) and not on land, defines a clear boundary for plastic problems. Hence, the People's Committees of the coastal provinces are responsible for participation. As a means to enforce local waste management and plastic practices, the Naval Forces, Maritime Police, and Border Guards are mobilized to control and handle "violations [of] laws on the management of marine plastic litter" (Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2020, 25). Similar to the first stage, the top-down methods for successful environmental campaigns include "propagating, raising awareness, changing consumption behaviors, and responses toward plastic products and plastics in the ocean" (Prime Minister's Office 2019, 2).

The People's Committee of An Giang Province is exempted from the duty of participation in the new environmental programs targeting plastic pollution because the province has no coastline. This exemption also applies to local authorities in places where large numbers of Hòa Hảo are located. Actually, provinces without coastal areas are liable for waste segregation under a different law from those that border the sea (Law No. 72/2020/QH14 on environmental protection was issued on November 17, 2020). But in all provinces, with or without a coastline, consumers are responsible for their use of plastic products, especially single-use plastics and plastic bags. This means that they should refrain from accepting these products, or they must pay more for them at marketplaces.

In order to reduce plastic use, many supermarkets all over the nation have switched to eco-friendly bags and charge more for single-use plastics. Consumers are given shopping baskets made of hard plastic or materials with bio-alternative solutions. Billboards, panels, and warning signs for plastic litter have become present in many places including the Seven Mountains, a sacred space for Hòa Hảo and many other religions. Nevertheless, these plastic interventions have negligible effects on people and rely heavily on top-down propaganda or media outreach icons (figure 4.1). Such interventions for behavior change also distract public concerns about plastics from the main actors who need legislative management such

Figure 4.1: A billboard inside a Buddhist temple with slogans, such as: “Say NO to single-use plastic and plastic waste,” “Clean up polluted waste wherever you are,” and “Protecting the environment is protecting our lives.” (Photo by Nhung Lu Rots)

as plastic manufacturers and packaging businesses (Muposhi, Mpinganjira, and Wait 2022; Pathak and Nichter 2021).

The new emphasis on plastics culminated in July 2022 when the Vietnamese prime minister signed a decision to achieve net-zero plastic waste by 2050 and decided to opt for reusing, recycling, and treating 85 percent of the plastic waste generated. In order to succeed, since then the state has sought to employ a plastic neutral strategy, and encouraged producers to utilize materials made of carbon-negative polypropylene (plant-based PP), which are biomaterials and bio-degradable plastics (Quế Chi 2023; Vinh Tho and N. An 2022). While such policy shifts have affected the daily rituals and practices at Hòa Hảo temples, my field observations show a contradictory dynamic emerging within the Hòa Hảo communities, in which formal teachings and policies call for a reduction in the use of plastic, while daily religious routines and practices continue to rely on a considerable consumption of plastic. The next sections analyze this contradictory dynamic.

The CEC and Its Environmental Action Plans

In 2016, after attending several national conferences and environmental training programs for faith-based communities, the CEC proposed an action plan to the Vietnam Fatherland Front in An Giang Province. As part of the plan, the committee implemented various methods to raise public awareness of plastic pollution and the negative impacts of climate change. These consisted of combining sermons with environmental courses, inserting religious texts into environmental education materials, and promoting behavioral change as a type of self-cultivation. By taking a leading role in propagating environmentalism, the CEC has not only strengthened their followers' beliefs in millenarianism, but also built a strong political network in the Mekong Delta.

In 2017, the CEC invited a former local official who had run state-sponsored propaganda programs to take charge of an environmental program and working agenda for the religion. That official has prepared environmental action plans, training materials, and speeches for Hòa Hảo's religious leaders. He is a dedicated Hòa Hảo Buddhist and a loyal member of the Communist Party who worked for the Propaganda Department of Phú Tân for many years. In an interview in January 2023, the official told me about success in organizing twelve classes with 2,186 participants, mainly Hoà Hảo priests, lay members, and lay teachers when he was working directly under the CEC.

The retired official was also the main environmental teacher in the classes. In his lectures, he reinterpreted the Hòa Hảo scriptures and founders' teachings, which were written based on millenarian movements in the south in the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to his teaching materials, local challenges include plastic waste in rivers and canals, toxic agricultural substances and food safety, soil erosion on the riverbanks, and ineffective water management due to rising saltwater levels (CEC 2018). Most importantly, these teaching materials justify the new alliance between Hòa Hảo and the Vietnamese state that was established for the Religion and Environment campaign in 2015.

Similar to the speech of the CEC chair, the retired official interpreted modern climate science in accordance with Hòa Hảo practices and beliefs by citing and quoting the poems of the founder, Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ, from the 1940s. By doing so, he directly linked current regional environmental challenges to environmental disasters in the Mekong Delta in previous periods, which at the time were interpreted as signs of the Buddhist Low Era (*Hạ Ngươn*)—a time of turmoil that the founder had prophesized in his lifetime (McHale 2004, 3). In sum, leaders and Hòa Hảo priests had inserted millenarian ideas, their founder's teachings, and his predictions of apocalyptic events prior to the Dragon Flower Assembly, into their environmental action plans and teachings.

During my fieldwork, I had conversations with several priests who interpreted recent apocalyptic events as signs that we are currently in the final phase of the Low Era (*Mạt Pháp*). These events include disease outbreaks, wars and world conflicts, and natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. According to them, the Low Era is coming to an end, and the Dragon Flower Assembly is about to begin. Interestingly, the environmental propaganda documents mentioned above refer to these same events. In the education materials, however, this series of apocalyptic events is explicitly associated with the "current status and consequences of climate change" (CEC 2018, 8). They even claim that Pontiff Huỳnh had already predicted climate change during his lifetime, based on his poems about extreme weather in the scriptures (CEC 2018, 1).

In addition to training courses, the CEC issued guidance documents to all Hòa Hảo temples to explain the consequences of climate change, mixing scientific language with their reinterpretation of Buddhist philosophy and founder teachings. When I asked some worshippers at the An Hòa Tự temple during the New Year holidays about their notions of environmental change, they recited the poems from these guidance documents. Many talked about their Buddhist belief of the Low Era and good merits needed for their afterlives. Survival after the pandemic was one of the positive signs of good merits. Therefore, they continued to generate good deeds, do charity works, cultivate the self, and perform the everyday rituals of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. For example, many worshippers recited two sentences from a poem written by Huỳnh Phú Sổ in 1940 with the title "In Conversation with the Kitchen Gods." Below is the poetic description of natural disasters that have left a lasting impression in the Vietnamese collective memory.

> *The many rainstorms in 1940, the Yang Metal Dragon year,*
> *Forced bitterness and grief on humankind.*

They also memorized another poem in "Teachings on the Non-Action of the Spirit" in 1939 (CEC 2011, 99)

> *The weather is stormy and out of control*
> *Unlike the past, rain and sunshine change*
> *Trivial matters should be of no concern to the living*
> *In order to spare time for fulfilling their duty.* [7]

By reciting these poems, Hòa Hảo believers remind each other of the teachings of their religious founder who stressed the role of self-cultivating practices, doing good deeds, and fulfilling religious duties in challenging times. Some believers compared unruly weather in the past (during the first phase of the Low Era) to

the COVID-19 outbreak and recent landslides along the Hậu riverbank in An Giang and Đồng Tháp provinces (considered as signs of the last phase of the Low Era). Several priests used the poems to stress that time is running out, urging listeners to convert to the Hòa Hảo religion. They said that no time should be wasted before the Dragon Flower Assembly opens. In short, Hòa Hảo notions of environmental change directly link to millenarian ideas, in sermons and oral conversation, as well as in written propaganda documents.

The CEC educates its followers not only about Buddhist philosophy and doctrines, but also teaches them the guidelines and policies of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front and Government Committee of Religious Affairs. From 2017 to 2019, they combined training courses for Buddhist lay teachers with lectures on environmental protection and responses to climate change. The training courses lasted from one week to a month, and environmental lectures were inserted into the curriculum on several days. Hòa Hảo priests called for religious devotees to take responsibility for protecting the environment, telling them that their behavior should move toward responsible consumption and the cautious use of plastic at marketplaces.

As the prepared propaganda documents suggested, trainees in classes for lay teachers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism were taught good consumer behavior such as using fewer plastic products, bringing bio-material baskets when they went shopping, and refusing single-use plastic bags. Lecturers encouraged Buddhists to "say no to plastic" (*nói không với rác thải nhựa*). The priests also explained the consequences of climate and environmental change, in addition to introducing grassroots models of food safety, organic farming, and waste segregation, all of which had been carried out successfully in areas with large number of followers.

After passing the exams at the end of training courses, attendants are certified as lay teachers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism by the CEC. Thanks to the certification, the priests can carry out sermons and attract followers at their local temples. Many Hòa Hảo communities have a temple as one of their communal meeting places. These temples have no abbot: only leaders, certified priests, lay teachers, and registered members of the CEC can disseminate the founder's teachings and Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, Hoà Hảo priests are not Buddhist monks whose religious practices and rituals adhere to Buddhist monastic systems (*tu xuất gia*). The priests, lay members, and lay teachers practice their religion mainly in the home (*tu tại gia*) and occasionally at Hòa Hảo temples, many of which have been built after 1999. In these temples, social gatherings for sermons and religious activities are organized twice a month, and the local authorities and police are always present to supervise the activities.

In order to amplify religious activities and environmental performance, the CEC assembled a communication team consisting of a group of media experts, reporters, and vloggers who take photos, make films of religious devotees' activities,

and write news for the Hòa Hảo website. The team has written enthusiastic online articles about Hòa Hảo temples, their religious initiatives, volunteer events, and environmental prizes. However, this idealized online image created by Hòa Hảo did not always correspond to what I observed during volunteer work at temples and communal places and, as I will return to, there is a large gap between local practices on the one hand and environmental education action plans on the other.

Importantly, however, participation in national environmental programs have provided Hòa Hảo leaders with an opportunity to enhance the standing and status of their religion in the Mekong Delta. As I have noted, Religion and Environment is one among many national programs that Hòa Hảo Buddhism participated in, in which religious leaders collaborated with the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Partaking in national programs helps the organization build good relations with the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs in An Giang Province. These provincial state bodies write reports on Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and a positive report helps to legitimize further religious activities and practices. Thus, the CEC has used the state-led environmental program as an opportunity to act against environmental destruction and, at the same time, to position themselves as one of the most powerful religions in the Mekong Delta.

For example, national participation in the program Religion and Environment from 2015 to 2022 put the CEC in a leading position in terms of collaboration with the state. Good collaborative reputation legitimizes other religious activities and raises social status for Hòa Hảo lay members in the Mekong Delta. Legitimacy and status also help to compete against other religions for membership and influence (Ngo 2018; Roszko 2020). Seen in this light, waste management models, grassroots activities, and local and national environmental prizes are noticeable good performances, which bring the CEC's leadership into focus and attracts the positive attention of the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

Hòa Hảo Buddhism has also built a broad political and religious network in the region thanks to their cooperation with local authorities and state bodies. Among different religious groups in the Mekong Delta, the provincial Vietnam Fatherland Front can rely on the Hòa Hảo role model to execute regional agendas, programs, and campaigns for civil society in An Giang Province. In exchange, the Government Committee of Religious Affairs has allowed the religion to have one more day for nationwide religious celebrations (25 November). In this way, the religious practices and activities of Hòa Hảo Buddhism are legitimized by the state, and in pursuing the stamp of state approval, Hòa Hảo Buddhism is not alone. Other religious groups such as Cao Đài also came up with a model to "use hygienic water, clean stagnant ponds, collect waste, and process waste hygienically" (Trần Thắng 2020, 2022).[8] Similar to Hòa Hảo, this minority religion has actively participated in the national program Religion and Environment since 2015.

In addition to having a strong network, the CEC has successfully created two official days for their members to meet in large numbers (GCRA 2022), thanks to their leading role in the execution of environmental action plans. The first is the anniversary of Hoà Hảo Buddhism's inauguration day (18 May), and the second is Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ's birthday (25 November). On these two occasions, worshippers are allowed to meet in masses not only at the birthplace of the founder, but also in temples and locations marked with Hòa Hảo Buddhist flags in south and central Vietnam. The religious flag is rectangular and maroon-brown, flying proudly in Hòa Hảo temple yards, in the working places of the executive committees, and in locations where believers can gather for organized festivals and pilgrimages. Some years the number of participants can reach to more than 100,000 in Phú Tân and nearby villages. Villagers generously offer the participants free food, free accommodations, and meaningful talks about their beliefs as ways to enrich their spiritual lives.

It is therefore no surprise that Hòa Hảo is currently one of the most influential religions in the Mekong Delta region. The CEC has set up 369 communal executive committees from southern to central Vietnam (from Cà Mau to Bình Định Province). There are also organizations for Hòa Hảo that have been established in Houston and Atlanta in the United States, and in 2021, the religion reported 1.2 million followers in Vietnam (GCRA 2022). Hundreds of thousands of people go on pilgrimages to Phú Tân every year. However, as I elaborate below, in these annual celebration as well as monthly festivals, Hòa Hảo believers paradoxically worsen the waste crisis due to the mass use of plastic for generating Buddhist merits. Despite the broader "green turn" in the religion, Hòa Hảo devotees rely heavily on plastic materials in their everyday rituals for doing good deeds and generating merit.

Hòa Hảo Lay Members and Their Grassroots Initiatives with Plastic Waste

In this part, I examine the discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up approaches in dealing with plastic waste within Hòa Hảo. I examine the importance of mass consumption and mass plastic production in religious rituals and Buddhist practices for merit generation. By juxtaposing national ambitions and leadership narratives with what actually happens on the ground, I demonstrate that while top-down methods may be effective in forging performative engagement with waste and temporary initiatives for reducing plastic, they have been less successful in transforming lay Buddhists' consumption at an everyday level.

During my fieldwork, I observed excessive plastic use at Buddhist festivals in the Mekong Delta, and the festivals at Hòa Hảo temples are no exception: neither

religious leaders nor lay members showed much environmental awareness of the plastic litter at the mass gatherings where plastic was often ubiquitous. As Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2023) observe, plastic has now become part of religious experience because it accommodates excessive consumption as a Buddhist practice (see also Abrahms-Kavunenko and Maud 2024). I made similar observations at the Hòa Hảo temples. Furthermore, my own conversations with leaders and donors suggest that the materiality of plastic helps religious followers generate Buddhist merits faster. For example, in my first interview with a member of the CEC in April 2022, the issue of plastic came up. At the committee's headquarter in Phú Tân I was served mineral water in ceramic cups and reused bottles. Looking at the transparent bottles, I wondered what material they were made of. As if reading my thoughts, the member said that the reused bottles were of hard plastic (tritan), donated by a producer in Saigon in 2019. Since then, receptionists at his office had washed the bottles and cups when meeting days ended. In a later meeting with the same executive member in 2023 at the same location, however, I was served mineral water in PET bottles. The Committee, I was told, had ended the initiative because the program Religion and Environment was no longer on their working agenda. Now, they were busy with other programs led by the Vietnam Fatherland Front in An Giang province.

During these two meetings, I also asked about the environmental engagement of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the national program Religion and Environment. In the first meeting, the member was proud to name the aforementioned award-winning temple in Cần Thơ City. When I asked about his leading role, he answered: "We approve good initiatives from our Communal Executive Committees and support them by doing the paperwork needed for each operation." In the later meeting, however, he diverted my attention to other charity works such as those in which Hòa Hảo devotees had engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, including rice kitchens, ambulance services, and charity clinics (Lu Rots 2025). He said that the CEC tried their best to convince their followers to use fewer plastic products. But, he added, the material was cheap and convenient for their practices as single-use plastic could be easily thrown out in order to save time.

My brief and perhaps somewhat anecdotal experience with the reused plastic bottles and my conversations with the Hòa Hảo leader appeared to be at odds with the kind of representations I had earlier seen on mass media. One possible explanation for this is that Hòa Hảo leaders had fewer incentives to continue their environmental action plans after the legislative change in 2019. This was, in fact, confirmed during my interviews with other leaders, donors, and volunteers in 2022 and 2023.

For example, when I visited the award-winning temple in Cần Thơ City in February 2023—the temple that received a national prize in 2019 for its model of

waste management and waste processing plant—I discovered that the processing plant was an incinerator to burn single-use plastic such as bags, lunch boxes, and plastic utensils, something that affects the environment negatively by emitting toxic smoke, burning more trees, and inducing more plastic waste consumption. In the temple's front yard, I saw firewood drying under the sun, covering the whole yard. In the temple kitchen, the chef was busy preparing lunch in styrofoam boxes for the volunteers who were searching for firewood in the nearby areas. Incidentally, my visit occurred three weeks after Vietnamese New Year (*Tết)* and one week after the lunar year's first full moon festival (*Tết Nguyên Tiêu*), two of the biggest Buddhist festivals of the year; no wonder that the temple had to refill its firewood supply and continuously feed the waste processing plant for weeks on end. However, as I learned in a later interview with a waste management officer, incinerators for plastic waste must have two processing systems: a primary process for treating the waste, and a secondary process for treating the smoke, but as far as I could see, the Hòa Hảo incinerator had no secondary system.

During my fieldwork, I also found myself in situations where I too used substantial amounts of plastic as a matter of routine. One example is the serving of free congee that I engaged in at the An Hòa Tự temple on Vietnamese New Year's Eve in 2023. The temple offered the congee meal after a ceremony of praying for a peaceful and prosperous year. For my volunteer work, I was delegated to work on the final process of serving food, adding green shallots, black pepper, and plastic spoons into steaming hot congee bowls. Not far from my spot, single-use utensils and plastic cups began to accumulate and fill up huge plastic bags, while the used eating bowls were constantly being washed and dried for reuse in feeding the congee to thousands of people.

People came to enjoy the free food and drinks and the festive atmosphere; before heading home, they donated money to the temple and thanked the Buddha for his blessings. While some noticed the huge amount of plastic waste, no one had thought about ways of reducing the excessive plastic use while serving the masses. Rather, for an event on a scale such as this, plastic was found to be a cheap, fast, hygienic, and convenient solution. These material qualities of plastic are important reasons why many temples and donors continue to rely almost exclusively on plastic materials: serving a large number of people with food and drinks in plastic containers simply helped them to accumulate merit by doing good deeds faster, in a context in which it is believed that the Dragon Flower Assembly will soon open (figure 4.2).

Thus, plastic-enabled consumption on a large scale facilitated swift merit generation through doing good deeds. For example, one donor told me that being able to serve the masses tea and coffee during the festivals at Hòa Hảo temples helped her family to generate Buddhist merit, a concrete sign of which was her

Figure 4.2: Serving free drinks in single-use plastic cups at a Hòa Hảo temple.
(Photo by Nhung Lu Rots)

family's prosperity. Several family members had also seen Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ in their dreams. The family continued to do good deeds and show their generosity by using their wealth to supply drinks in small single-use plastic cups to thousands of people. Mass consumption and plastic use, therefore, enable Hòa Hảo devotees to continuously generate merit on an expanded scale, given that Buddhist festivals are organized twice a month and all year round at Hòa Hảo temples.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how Hòa Hảo leaders, priests, and lay teachers have taken up and promoted the environmental cause initiated by the Vietnamese state. While leadership statements, training programs, and network building have been instrumental in raising environmental awareness among Hòa Hảo communities, their grassroots initiatives and ritual practices appear to have at best an ambiguous relationship to plastic use. I have also suggested that contemporary activities such as cleaning the streets, picking up plastic, and segregating waste can all be seen as leaders' efforts for gaining more social, political, and religious legitimacy. These environmental actions have largely helped to increase the public

influence of the CEC and contributed to Hòa Hảo gaining new popularity in the region. Thus, being seen as addressing the plastic crisis provided Hòa Hảo leaders with a legitimate cause and an opportunity to form political networks with state actors and local authorities. It enabled priests to call for action against pollution, organize training courses to raise environmental awareness, and propagate a green Dharma based on their founders' teachings. However, while such actions have indeed been instrumental in forging a performative environmentalism rooted in volunteerism, they have so far been less successful in creating a transformation in members' consumption behaviors in which the use of plastic is deeply embedded.

More broadly, national environmental campaigns such as those described in this chapter are unlikely to succeed without sufficient local support and grassroots implementation. As we have seen, religious leaders' speeches spearheaded a temporary interest in environmental issues among Hòa Hảo communities. Top-down propaganda methods have been effective for mobilizing local groups to tackle urgent environmental challenges, but more substantial initiatives are needed to raise long-term awareness, transform deep-rooted behaviors, and offer longstanding solutions. That this has not yet been achieved is evident from how local Buddhist practices of charity and notions of Buddhist merit-making continue to depend on the mass production and consumption of plastic. Although some attempts were made by religious leaders to align environmental activism with millenarian beliefs, popular notions about the importance of merit-making through material practices ultimately proved more resilient and have so far thwarted attempts to reduce plastic waste at the local level.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Nguyễn Võ Châu Ngân, who helped me with access to the field and invited me to Can Tho University. I value the insights and guidance he provided on waste management in the Mekong Delta. The academic events that he and his colleagues organized in 2023 have also been a great source of inspiration in writing this chapter. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Transsustain project who read earlier versions of this chapter. Their feedback and comments have been very helpful. I am also deeply grateful to my anonymous interlocutors, who kindly shared their lived experiences with plastic and waste with me.

[2] Hòa Hảo adherents call their religious founder by different names. In addition to 'the Pontiff Huỳnh' (*Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ*), he is also known as 'the Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ, and 'the Venerable Teacher' (*Đức Thầy*) in various types of literature.

[3] "Hòa Hảo priests" and "lay teachers" are used interchangeably in this chapter.

[4] The Vietnam Fatherland Front is an umbrella group of mass movements and civil society organizations in Vietnam, which operate in alignment with the Communist Party of Vietnam.

[5] Dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is a basic Buddhist teaching in which no phenomenon exists independently. This means that one phenomenon arises because of factors and conditions made by other phenomena.

[6] There are three levels in the organization of Hòa Hảo Buddhism: the CEC (*Ban Trị sự Trung ương Giáo hội Phật giáo Hòa Hảo)*; communal executive committees in towns, wards, districts, and communes (*Ban Trị sự xã*); and representative offices in cities and provinces (*Ban Đại Diện Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo tỉnh, thành phố*; CEC 2020).

[7] The author translated from the Vietnamese verses: Năm Canh Thìn nhiều trận gió mưa, Cho nhơn loại trăm cay cùng ngàn đắng (in *Trao Lời cùng Ông Táo*, 1940); Trời dông gió sái mùa sái tiết, Nắng cùng mưa cũng khác xưa rồi, Khuyên dương gian bỏ các việc tồi, Đặng lo liệu cho tròn phận sự. (in *Giác Mê Tâm Kệ*, 1939).

[8] Deriving from the same Buddhist tradition, the Strange Perfume from Precious Mountain religion (*Bửu Hương Kỳ Sơn*), Hòa Hảo Buddhism shares both similarities and differences with Cao Đài. The two religions are currently competing for power and influence in the Mekong Delta. In one interview with me, a Hòa Hảo leader expressed his envy of Cao Đài's position in getting the attention of the Vietnamese government. In particular, Cao Đài leaders have received more visits from higher ranking state officials than Hòa Hảo has.

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CHAPTER 5

Pragmatic Environmentalism: Sikhism and Grassroots Environmental Advocacy in North India

Aase Jeanette Kvanneid

Abstract

In urban North India, climate change, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and pollution severely impact the environment. Small grassroots initiatives, such as EcoSikh in Punjab, address these challenges by anchoring their activism in religious faith while striving to mobilize beyond their socio-religious communities. Drawing on fieldwork with EcoSikh, this chapter explores how Sikh environmentalists anchor their environmental advocacy in Sikh teachings, examining how "pragmatic environmentalism" functions as a non-confrontational strategy to navigate politically sensitive contexts and to mobilize local communities across sociocultural divides. It argues that addressing the context of "pragmatic environmentalism" is crucial to understand the potentials and limitations of religiously inspired grassroots environmentalism in North India and beyond.

Keywords: Grassroots movements, Sikh environmentalism, environmental advocacy, pragmatism

Introduction

India is, in 2024, the world's most populous country, the third-largest producer of greenhouse gases, and it hosts three of the fifteen most polluted cities in the world (Forbes 2024; The World Bank 2024).[1] Through a process of climate change, land degradation, biodiversity loss, sinking water tables, excess waste, toxic air and polluted water, the cumulative impacts of climate and society on the Indian environment now pose a threat to food, water, and energy security, as well as the health and well-being of all living beings (Dubash 2019; Pörtner et al. 2019; Krishnan and Dhara 2021; Mehta, Adam, and Srivastava 2021; World Health Organization, 2024). Indian environmental organizations are among the important actors working to solve these increasingly serious issues. The large international environmental organizations have proven to be powerful in their ability to affect policy and politics in the larger international arena, yet they appear largely invisible in the everyday lives of most of India's population. Despite their efforts and the severity of

issues at stake, the "green giants" appear to struggle to mobilize the kind of broad grassroots support needed to change the unsustainable direction of India's development trajectory. Encouraged by scholars such as Duara (2014) and Clapperton and Piper (2019), it seems timely to look beyond the "green giants" of environmental activism and toward the smaller environmental initiatives of India to see what they are achieving in their local communities, and how. Over a period of six weeks of fieldwork in North India in 2022, I visited four environmental grassroots organizations which, despite being small and diverse in their background, composition, and ambition, were all actively engaging with local communities to encourage a sustainable future for society.[2]

This chapter will focus on the largest of the four—EcoSikh. This organization is particularly relevant for the topic of this volume, as it explicitly anchors its activism in the Sikh religion and aims to mobilize both within the local socioreligious community as well as beyond. Through my interviews with EcoSikh in India and Norway in 2022, as well as by visiting three Guru Nanak Sacred Forests planted by EcoSikh as part of their environmental campaign in Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi, I observed a grassroots organization that engaged and initiated several projects and processes on the ground, and that in a distinctively pragmatic way, enabled outreach and dialogue on environmental issues across socioreligious communities. The key questions I explore in this chapter are: What role did Sikhism have in the organization's environmentalism? How does religion affect outreach beyond their own Sikh socioreligious community? What has caused their pragmatic, non-confrontational approach to environmental activism, and what are the implications of this form of environmental engagement?

In this chapter, I draw on environmental anthropology, political ecology, and religious environmental studies to enable a nuanced analysis of EcoSikh and the role of religion in a grassroots Indian environmental movement. In the first part, I look into EcoSikh India and its various projects and initiatives before turning to the role Sikhism has played in enabling environmental advocacy on the ground. To explain the reason for EcoSikh's relative success as a grassroots movement, I also highlight how socioreligious identities are closely related to other aspects that shape EcoSikh's form of environmentalism, namely caste, class, and politics. Based on my analysis, I introduce the concept of "pragmatic environmentalism" as a way to describe the contemporary Indian environmentalist grassroots movement. I conclude by arguing that this pragmatism is as much a consequence of skill, as it is a necessity for performing environmental activism in an increasingly polarized society. First, however, an introduction to the case study is needed.

EcoSikh India: Background and Origin

Whether traveling through the congested, densely populated capital of New Delhi or the rural and urban areas of the northern states of Uttarakhand and Punjab, the severity of environmental destruction and economic inequity in North India were pronounced at the time of my fieldwork in late 2022. Some issues were more visible in the cities, such as cows rummaging in the ubiquitous roadside litter and plastic waste for fodder, or the severe air pollution from industry, traffic, and crop stubble burning leading to school closings and remain indoors advisories. Other environmental problems were more noticeable in the districts: deforestation and land degradation combined with the heavy use of fertilizer and pesticides in agriculture, inadequate wastewater and solid waste management, and the loss of biodiversity—all of which demonstrate how acute the environmental problems of North India have become (N. Singh 2022; Liu, et al. 2021; UNEP 2012).

In Punjab, known as one of India's most important "grain-basket" states, the effects of the 1970s Green Revolution in agricultural food production have left the ecosystem vulnerable to the cumulative impacts of climate change and environmental deterioration. It is also here, in Punjab's largest city, Ludhiana, that the small environmental organization EcoSikh India is located. As the name indicates, the organization is a Sikh community effort to mitigate the impacts of climate change and environmental deterioration (EcoSikh 2024). EcoSikh India is an independent chapter of the main EcoSikh organization, founded by the Sikh diaspora in the United States in 2009.

EcoSikh India is actively engaged in environmental projects and processes directed at mitigating air pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, as well as promoting organic and natively grown food and awareness-raising within and beyond the Indian Sikh community. From a humble start in 2016, EcoSikh has in eight years grown into a professionally managed organization with five full-time employees, four on-call employees, as well as a growing number of community volunteers. The staff are all highly educated and fluent in English, and most of the volunteers were young adults, often students. Many of the staff members were recruited from the large number of unemployed engineers and technology graduates of the region (Ahmed 2023; Kumar 2024). As a sign of the organization's growth rate, a media and communications officer had been hired not long before my visit to manage and develop content for the website and news-media presence, as well as to share stories of achievements through social media. The daily work itself was managed from a small, ground-floor office in a residential area of Ludhiana, and the majority of EcoSikh initiatives and projects were located in this region, as well as in Haryana and the union territories of Chandigarh and Delhi.

The first campaign of EcoSikh India was the "Millet Mission." This campaign latched on to an ongoing grassroots movement toward "green *gurdwaras*" (Sikh community houses of worship) that began in parts of the Sikh community around 2010–2012, when several *gurdwaras* in Punjab began to recycle waste and install solar panels (Singh 2022). In the Millet Mission, EcoSikh promoted the use of organic foods in *langar*, the Sikh community's practice of a community kitchen serving a free meal in the *gurdwaras*. When organic, natively grown millet replaced rice in the community kitchens and gardens of the iconic and holiest of Sikh gurdwaras, the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Bassi 2016; Vijaykumar 2016) in 2016, the "Millet Mission" established EcoSikh as an environmental initiative in the local community. Other efforts by EcoSikh to encourage environmental awareness among Sikhs have been through celebrating the seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai's enthronement day on 14 March as "Sikh Environmental Day." Judging by the growing number of EcoSikh Environmental Day toolkits sent out from the Ludhiana office to *gurdwaras* around India, the celebration seems to have caught on in the Sikh community in India, just as Prill (2015) has shown to be the case for the American EcoSikh.

Other EcoSikh projects active during my 2022 visit were the air-pollution mitigation projects "Clean Air Punjab" and the more local "Lungs of Ludhiana." Related to the first project, representatives from the organization were preparing for meetings with labor unions and drivers on the electrification of auto-rickshaws in Amritsar *(The Tribune* 2022). Others were planning workshops with Punjabi farmers and researchers from the Punjab Agricultural University to reduce large-scale stubble burning, a cost-efficient but extremely air-polluting method for enriching the soil after a large rice harvest (Abdurrahman et al. 2020). Through Clean Air Punjab, EcoSikh contributed directly to the crafting of a state action plan for clean air for the Punjab state government. Other parts of their activities included visiting local schools, both private and public, to raise awareness of environmental issues and the dangers of air pollution, and trying to engage the children in what they and their families could do to mitigate it. The project manager reported that so far, the children had responded well to their workshops, and she had heard that they had asked their parents to stop unnecessarily allowing their car engines to idle, to avoid the use of firecrackers at Diwali, and to replace single-use drink bottles with reusable ones.

The planting of "micro-forests" was, however, EcoSikh's most prominent campaign. Originally starting as an ambition to plant 550 Guru Nanak Sacred Forests as a tribute to the 550th birthday of Guru Nanak in 2019, the campaign quickly attracted global attention. By 2023, EcoSikh had planted 850 micro-forests with one hundred native, rare, and endangered species in India (M. Singh 2023). Sacred forests have also been planted by Sikh communities abroad, in Ireland (EcoSikh UK 2022) and Canada (EcoSikh Canada 2023). In India, all Sacred Forests are geo-tagged

and can be located on Google Maps (EcoSikh 2024). At the beginning of the project, planting a forest turned out to be a challenge to the EcoSikh staff. As the Forest Manager recounted:

> In the beginning, the forests would just die—the survival rate was only about half! We did not know, for example, what species would grow, from what habitat, in what soil, at what temperature, or how much water they needed. We were engineers you know! (Laughing). We were so enthusiastic, but we knew nothing about forests! (EcoSikh Interviews 2022)

Concerned that the campaign would fail from the start, they eagerly accepted the offer from an environmentally concerned industrialist in Mumbai, Charan Singh, who had approached EcoSikh and advised them to try the "Miyawaki method." This is a micro-afforestation technique developed by the Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki to make a "micro-forest" of compatible native species in small spaces. The method was first applied in India in 2010 by, among others, Shubhendu Sharma, founder of the for-profit company Afforestt, who actively promotes this forest planting method through his company (Afforestt 2023). Sharma has been training and advising the EcoSikh staff on the method which is used in all sacred forests planted in India today.

Ideally, a Guru Nanak Sacred Forest consists of a heterogeneous canopy of native trees and bushes supporting a diversity of animal lifeforms. The forests are planted predominantly in public parks or spaces in villages and cities, or on private and industrial land. As the Miyawaki method allows the forests to be very small, the Guru Nanak forests range between minor pockets of trees (20m^2) to the decisively largest EcoSikh-planted forest in Pathankot (600sq meters; EcoSikh 2024).

In 2022, I visited three EcoSikh Sacred Forests. The first was planted on industrial land behind a steel factory owned by an elderly, environmentally concerned Sikh. From the street, the factory land looked as dry and inhospitable as any North Indian industrial property, yet behind the walled gates, and behind the factory building itself, a young sacred forest with a variety of species of different sizes and heights, growing at will, laid claim to one corner of the backyard, while a park with a wide range of edible fruit trees laid claim to the other. Although most of the forests planted in Punjab belong to the Sikh community or the Sikh diaspora, the Sacred Forests are also found in public and private parks, schoolyards, and industrial areas across India, adopted by non-Sikhs. The land is not acquired by EcoSikh, it is the property owner who "adopts" the forest, which could theoretically be done by anyone, anywhere. If the forest is constructed in a village, for example, the forest will belong to the village. However, if the level of environmental toxins in the soil and water is too high, this could exclude some areas, although this could in some cases be mitigated by removing more than the required depth of one meter of topsoil.

When a plot of land is considered for afforestation, the EcoSikh Forest staff will survey the surrounding vegetation and soil quality, and procure the permissions, materials, machinery, and manpower needed. A team of EcoSikh staff and volunteers from the area first replaces the top layer of soil with composted soil before they plant the trees cultivated in local nurseries. The saplings are attended to in the first eighteen months by the company or individual "adopting" the forest, mainly by watering in the dry season. After this period, the forest is largely left to grow at its own pace. As the Forest Manager told me, the Punjab Agricultural University was a little apprehensive about the method at first, especially since the tree species were planted very close to each other. Yet after a recent workshop held in one of the forests, the researchers had been genuinely surprised at how well it seemed to thrive. Talking about the direct environmental impact of the various initiatives, the staff at EcoSikh were aware that in a larger context, they could address but a fragment of the environmental issues at home and abroad, but this did not dampen their enthusiasm. For them, these projects were a tiny step in "the right direction" and considered much better than doing nothing at all. In the words of one Project Manager: "You know, we are not changing the environment … We are changing the people" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022). And a key means 'to change people' is through the religion of Sikhism, as many of my interviews and conversations emphasized (EcoSikh Interviews 2022; EcoSikh 2024).

In the following, I begin with a brief introduction to Sikhism as religion, before looking more closely at the relationship between Sikhism and modern-day EcoSikh environmentalism. I distinguish between Sikhism as a formalized, textual religion, and Sikhism as an aspect of a socioreligious identity, as these aspects came to matter in different ways.

The Role of Sikhism in Sikh Environmentalism

As a formalized religion, Sikhism was founded by its first Guru, Nanak Singh (1469–1539) in late fifteenth-century Punjab. This makes Sikhism a relatively recent religious tradition compared to Hinduism, the largest religion in India. Today, there are an estimated 26–30 million registered Sikhs in the world, of which approximately 90 percent live in India (Government of India 2011; Kramer 2021). Sikhism is commonly regarded as a monotheistic religion based on a textual tradition. Sikhs believe in the one, timeless, immaterial God, referred to as "Akal" and depicted with a sign (*Ek Ongka*). For Sikhs, the immaterial God is conceptualized as a form of energy that is present in all creation. Central to the religion is also the sacredness of the Sikh gurus. Although the title 'guru' in India can refer to any revered religious or spiritual teacher, 'guru' in a Sikh context refers to a historical lineage of ten Gurus who brought forth the message of God. The first nine gurus were men, while

the last guru is the holy religious scripture *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (N. Singh 2022; Prill 2015; Virk 2021; EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

When talking about the role of religion in their environmental advocacy, several of my EcoSikh interlocutors emphasized how the Sikh philosophy is ideal for the sustainable development of society. Sikhism, they argued, teaches humans to care for nature in a way that, due to its openness to other religions and cultures, will resonate well across faiths and cultural traditions. While Western or modern forms of environmentalism are distinctively dualist in the way they externalize and objectify nature as "environment," Sikh philosophy approaches the environment holistically, as an integral part of all lifeforms. To enable effective outreach within and beyond the Sikh community, Sikh ideals of community practices, such as the concepts of *sarbat da bhala* (the well-being of all), *seva* (service to ensure this well-being) and *sangat* (congregation to support community and community action), are argued to be well-suited.

By drawing attention to the environmental aspects of Sikh tradition, EcoSikh attempts to help people to "remember the meaning, revive it, and connect to our roots." Selected verses and the life story of Guru Har Rai (1630–1661) were also shared with me as examples of how well Sikhism encourages care for nature and the well-being of the environment. In her interviews with me, the EcoSikh president would, for example, elaborate on how EcoSikh draws attention to the "original meaning" of well-known *gurbani* (Sikh hymns) as part of their advocacy. One example was the hymn "Air Is the Guru, Water Is the Father, and Earth Is the Great Mother of All" that is recited by devoted Sikhs every day as part of their daily prayer. She described their approach to engaging fellow Sikhs in environmentalism: "We say this every day, but we have forgotten its meaning: what does it mean? So we are asking them [our fellow Sikhs]: how are we treating the air, water, and earth? This was so powerful that they now understood" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022). The life and teachings of Guru Har Rai were particularly seen to reflect Sikhism's sensitivity and compassion for nature (also noted by Prill, 2015) and were, therefore, particularly apt for emphasizing the environmental values found in Sikhism. Another example was the Sikh cultural relationship with trees and forests. Sikh *gurdwaras* are often encircled by trees (Prill 2015), and Sikhism has a tradition for "sacred trees," such as Dukh Bhanjani and Baba Budha Sahib near the Golden Temple. Additionally, many Sikh shrines are named after species of trees, such as the highly revered Neem and Holy Fig (Pipal), which arguably have aided the Sacred Forest campaign.

The way that EcoSikh merges environmental and religious philosophy resembles what the historian Prasenjit Duara (2014) argues to be a potent enabler for dialogical transcendence toward sustainability. In contrast to scholars who have emphasized how spiritual traditions can be reservoirs for both ecologically friendly *and* destructive views and practices (Huber and Pedersen 1997; Bruun and Kalland 1995; Gold 2010; Gold 2002; Haberman 2006), or enabling polarizing,

ultra-nationalist rhetoric (Alley 2000, Tomalin 2002, 2023, Gherter 2011, Sharma 2012), Duara argues that Asian religious texts and teachings carry a transcendent potential that can induce environmental grassroots mobilization across communities and cultures. As Hulme (2009; 2017) too has argued, science or scientific evidence alone can never provide access to all that matters—or that which is considered meaningful—to humans. When writing on how societies around the world have (failed) to mitigate climate change, Hulme argues for the need for a "grand narrative" or "myth" to guide societal development in a more sustainable direction (Hulme 2009; Hulme and Marshall 2009). The role of myths and grand narratives as sources of motivation resonates with what the EcoSikh Forest manager told me:

> I may not believe in the stories of the Bible or of Hindu mythology or even the Norse and Greek pantheon or in the Egyptian or African tribals—but I can believe in the morals or ethics these stories teach if it aligns with the teachings of my faith (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

As a local answer to a global call made by the WWF, UN, and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), can EcoSikh carry the prospects of a grassroots movement that resonates back into the global? EcoSikh staff believed it could, as the Forest Manager of EcoSikh put it:

> The UN tried to work through society, through politics, but they failed. Now they are trying through religion. The logic behind it was that if we [the Sikh community] started doing this [planting trees and protecting nature] in the name of our Guru, it would be a good thing. We are hoping that this movement can be copied and taken up by other faiths as well. This stems from a core concept of openness in Sikhism: good things should be shared (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

This, however, raises the question of whether Sikh environmentalism will resonate equally strongly among all Sikhs, and indeed whether it can aid environmental mobilization beyond the Sikh socioreligious community. To address the first question first: perhaps not. Although Sikhs are known for their strong sense of identity and community (Cheema 2006; Kinnvall 2002; van der Veer 2001; Prill 2015), the Sikh community is internally heterogeneous, and not all Sikhs are equally environmentally concerned or engaged. As Singh (2022), Mooney (2018) and Prill (2015) have all noted for Sikh environmental initiatives in Punjab and the Sikh US diaspora respectively, Sikhism must first be curated somewhat to fully align with contemporary environmentalist ideals. This has, in the case of EcoSikh, happened through a conscious process of recovery and reinterpretation of Sikh philosophy. Assisting this process, EcoSikh US has compiled an online environmental anthology

(Prill 2015, 229) highlighting, for example, elements and passages in written hymns and verses in Guru Granth Sahib that emphasize the life and teachings of Guru Har Rai (Prill 2015). For EcoSikh, Sikhism evidently offered the kind of moral and ethical compass that—interpreted or understood in the most hopeful way—can help move humanity toward a common path to sustainability. But the morals or ethics of (environmental) care obviously have not sprung from some religious or spiritual "pure space" alone. Knowledge or awareness of natural scientific processes (Leiserowitz and Thaker 2012; Dubash 2012) also matter. And, in studies of environment and climate change activism, tradition and culture, world-views and ideologies, as well as sentiments of sorrow and loss are identified as other powerful and transcultural sources of motivation for action (Norgaard 2011; Kvanneid 2021; Rudiak-Gould 2013). Indeed, when asked, the EcoSikh staff would readily acknowledge that their own concern for the environment had not originated exclusively from within Sikhism, but came about as a result of a combination of many impulses, including becoming aware of environmental destruction and climate change through education, media coverage, and direct exposure.

In all my interviews with EcoSikh, Sikhism was talked about less as an "environmental" religion in itself, and more as an apt "vehicle" for environmentalism. This indicates that it is not the Sikh religion as such that induces an environmental consciousness, but the process of an environmental reinterpretation of the Sikh tradition. This reinterpretation, tellingly, is not done by all Sikh religious leaders, but develops through environmental initiatives such as EcoSikh. Hence, if Sikhism is not the X-factor that can explain the relative success of EcoSikh as a grassroots organization, we must look to other factors. Below I suggest that by foregrounding social status, we can come to appreciate how strongly EcoSikh's advocacy has depended on social capital and on the close intertwinement of the Sikh religion with other powerful structures in Indian society. In the next section, I highlight two aspects relating to social status in particular: the symbolic standing of the Khalsa tradition within Sikhism itself, and the privileges and forms of access and connectivity that flow from particular class and caste locations.

Structural Enablers: Status, Power and Identity

Khalsa refers to a self-chosen path within Sikhism in which the devotee joins the martial tradition of the Sikh brotherhood, constituted by the tenth and last guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Being Khalsa is a lifelong commitment to the purest ideals of Sikhism: religious devotion, abstention from intoxicants (alcohol, tobacco, drugs, etc.) and adultery, and committing to *seva* (service) to protect the vulnerable (Kinnvall 2002). As an outward sign of commitment, a follower of the Khalsa will visibly

distinguish him or herself from other Sikhs by five signifiers: keeping the hair uncut and always wearing the *kirpan* (sword or knife), a steel wristband, a wooden comb, and a characteristic undergarment of cotton. To a certain extent, being a follower of the Khalsa does give a particular standing among Sikhs, and EcoSikh's association with this tradition could arguably be said to positively aid EcoSikh in gaining the respectability needed for them to advocate both within and outside their community.

This association with the Khalsa tradition has been a conscious choice made by EcoSikh in the US from the start, by symbolically extending the role of the Khalsa as warriors protecting the environment—a vulnerable part of God's creation (Mooney 2018, 325). Although some members of the EcoSikh staff belonged to the Khalsa tradition in India, being Khalsa was by no means a requirement for engaging with or in EcoSikh in India. As EcoSikh President Kaur explained, the founder of EcoSikh himself, Dr. Rajwant Singh, was not Khalsa, "just an ordinary Sikh" with a good network and a good reputation[3] (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

Social Standing Beyond the Sikh Community: Social Status and Class

The second aspect that enabled EcoSikh's environmental advocacy had to do with social status and class. EcoSikh was, as mentioned, founded in 2009 in the US by the then Chairman of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education (SCORE), Dr. Rajwant Singh. Dr. Singh had been invited to represent the global Sikh community at the 'One Earth' summit, a large interfaith event hosted by Prince Philip, the secular ARC[4] and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) at Windsor Castle in 2009 (EcoSikh 2024; Mooney 2018). Dr. Singh's Indian family background eventually led him to meet Dr. Supreet Kaur, who herself was an environmentally concerned Sikh working as an academic in India. Urged by Dr. Singh, Dr. Kaur went on to establish EcoSikh as an independent chapter in India with support from ARC. Receiving direct funding for the three first years, as well as providing the organization's members with access to ARC's large network of religious environmentalist groups both within India as well as internationally (Sharma 2012,182), ARC played an instrumental role in EcoSikh India's establishment, paving the way to other affiliations with powerful and influential networks within and beyond the Sikh community. A high social status among individual members can thus enable the formation of wider networks that can open doors to influential political fora, academic communities, and private sector boardrooms. It can also enable other more subtle forms of environmental advocacy, such as when female EcoSikh staff members host "kitty parties with a meaning" (EcoSikh Interviews, 2022). "Kitty parties" are popular social get-togethers hosted by and for women belonging to the higher social strata of urban India. The gatherings are mostly spaces for networking and socializing with peers, in which all members contribute in cash

or kind toward the next party, but can also be arenas for hosting charity events. In kitty parties hosted by EcoSikh, wives (predominantly the non-working wives of well-to-do husbands) gathered to also talk about topics related to environmental or climate change issues. This, according to one staff member, had resulted in several "Warrior Moms" who not only encouraged their husbands to promote environmental solutions in their workplaces but also wrote letters to the authorities, sent complaints to the government, and so on (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

Being supported by actors or institutions with economic or political muscle is, of course, an asset for any minor environmental organization, including EcoSikh. In 2022, EcoSikh was entirely funded by donations from rather wealthy individuals, such as industrialists or philanthropists, as well as through partnerships with large Indian companies, such as the ICICI Bank. To secure financing over time, however, was always a concern. As the organization grew and the number of projects and initiatives expanded, more funding was also needed for management and upkeep. As a possible solution to this challenge, EcoSikh had, at the time of my fieldwork, engaged in a lengthy process of applying for approval for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partner status. Since 2014, when India passed the CSR Act, Indian companies of a certain size have been obliged to spend 2 percent of their revenue toward addressing social and environmental impacts in a way that aids sustainability goals (Government of India 2024). Many companies choose to do this by donating money to CSR-registered civil society organizations. To be eligible as a CSR partner, the organization must meet set requirements for revenue, governance and transparency (Government of India and Ministry of Corporate Affairs 2024). Although the Indian CSR system has been criticized for directly privileging organizations that support the policies of the ruling party (Mkandawire and Utting 2003; Kleppe 2006), obtaining CSR status would evidently matter greatly for EcoSikh's future ability to pursue environmental advocacy. In 2023, EcoSikh was approved as an eligible CSR partner by the central government of India, and in the words of the Forest Manager: "Now the industries can plant a forest with EcoSikh as part of their CSR. That means—they are now reaching out to us—and they have both money and land!" (EcoSikh Forest Manager 2023). This also boosted EcoSikh's forest campaign which by 2024 had planted around one million Sacred Forests (SikhNet 2024).

Caste

The third important aspect related to social status as an enabling element for advocacy is caste. Although Sikhism is largely thought of as an egalitarian religion which is open to all, and which from the start renounced the endogamous social stratification system that is closely interwoven with Hindu ideals of ritual purity and impurity (Gupta 2005; van der Veer 2001), caste identity still matters within the

Sikh community. Albeit less pronounced, and with more room for social mobility compared to what is seen in Hindusim, the relevance of caste identity is, for example, apparent in Sikh marriages as well as in politics (Ram 2007; Singh 2021). It is therefore important to mention that EcoSikh India's leadership was associated with the Jat Sikh community. Jat is a caste identity that in North India enjoys a higher socioeconomic and sociocultural status through their association with landownership. As a numerically strong community of historical landowners, Jat Sikhs tend to accumulate both economic and political capital and are, as a whole, generally more privileged than the landless and often low-caste and Dalit communities of Indian Sikhs (Ram 2007, 4067). Being an organization with such a strong Jat Sikh imprint has, therefore, likely enabled EcoSikh's advocacy in political arenas that may be closed to less privileged Sikhs or much more difficult for them to access.

Cultural Identity Beyond Sikhism

A final element that deserves consideration as an enabling factor for EcoSikh's environmental advocacy is the prevalence of a more widely shared cultural identity that stretches beyond Sikhism. The Forest Campaign again serves as a good example. As mentioned above, trees—at least certain species of trees—have a particular cultural standing among Sikhs; however, this is also true for other North Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism (Kvanneid 2021; Gold 2010; Guha 1989). The scientific reasoning behind the Miyawaki method also emphasizes the distinct symbolism of forests as representing "carbon sinks" for storing carbon dioxide, or as the home of biodiversity (see, for example, Robbins 2020). Confined to smaller areas with scientifically selected species of trees, these forests were never referred to as "jungles,"[5] a word commonly used to refer to most native forests in North India and denoting something wild, uncontrolled, and even savage (Dove 1992, Kvanneid 2021). Emphasizing a selected blend of trees combined into a "forest" thus lends a "symbolic simplicity" to the campaign that easily resonates across religious communities in India.

Another aspect of the campaign that touches upon a more widely shared cultural identity is the emphasis on planting *native* trees to protect and restore the forests of the past. In conversations about all four North Indian environmental initiatives I visited, environmental decay was seen to happen mainly because of "modern" or "Western" practices, such as conspicuous consumption, greed, and egocentrism. This (undesired) development was seen to affect "all Indians" alike, irrespective of caste, creed, faith, and location. In my interviews, the environmentalists expressed feelings of discomfort, sorrow, and even fear about this change that they saw as not merely environmental, but also as a change in "Indian culture." Perceiving themselves and their peers as representing a disassociation or discontinuity with

the (somewhat idealized) past, the ecological crisis also represents a crisis of identity. As Sharma (2014) has noted, such sentiments can easily fall prey to the kind of ultra-nationalist rhetoric espoused by Hindu nationalist organizations (see Nielsen and Gokhale, this volume), yet this was not something I observed in the four environmental initiatives I encountered. For them, environmentalism generated feelings of hope and belonging: through participating in a common effort to restore a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle through everyday practices such as replacing rice with natively grown millet, or planting native species of trees, environmentalism was, to them, crucially about crafting a meaningful engagement with others, be that through strengthening relationships between people living in the present or by connecting to traditions representing generations now lost to time.

To sum up, EcoSikh's relative success in enabling environmental grassroots activities is the result of a complex set of interacting factors that includes the teachings and practices of Sikhism, as well as the status, social roles, and resource networks of individual activists, and which also draws sustenance from more widely resonant symbolic universes and identities that stretch well beyond Sikhism. Yet while these factors may thus be aligned in productive ways from the point of view of EkoSikh, they may also at times give rise to challenges. In the following section, I zoom in on some of the challenges that EcoSikh, as a Sikh environmental organization, has encountered in its efforts to change society, focusing especially on how these challenges have been navigated through pragmatism.

EcoSikh Environmentalism: The Pragmatic Approach

As EcoSikh's stated ambition was to reach out beyond the Sikh community, the organization soon found itself in a situation where it had to navigate quite pronounced differences and inequalities between social groups and their religious, cultural and political identities. My interviews with members of the organization revealed that this required a great deal of pragmatism and considerable contextual adaptation or even downplaying of their own identity, as well as their personal political or ideological convictions.

One telling example was how EcoSikh would downplay their religious and cultural identity when reaching out beyond the Sikh community, for example by speaking English and not Punjabi.

> You know, we speak English most of the time in these public places … although some [in the community] do want us to stick to Punjabi … but we disagree, language should not be a barrier. In a big meeting … I simply cannot afford to speak Punjabi and risk losing them! (EcoSikh Interviews 2022)

This downplaying of socioreligious identity seemed to be particularly important when talking to government and industry representatives outside of Punjab. These were situations in which EcoSikh was open to placing "religion on the side" to get the message across. In the words of the EcoSikh president: "From the onset of interaction, we are always very open. They should never think we are reaching out to the Sikh communities only to help. In the work itself, religion is not there" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

This pragmatic approach to dealing with the question of cultural identity when moving outside Punjab also showed up when I discussed the religious sacredness of the sacred forests with EcoSikh after visiting two that had been adopted by Hindus. One of the forests, planted in an enclosed park area in a posh residential area of New Delhi, had been adopted by a Hindu who had removed all visible signs of EcoSikh's affiliation. He had also denied the spiritual or religious significance of the forest, insisting that the forest was planted for educational and scientific reasons only. In asking the EcoSikh staff what they thought about this, the EcoSikh forest manager responded that this was not a problem. Everyone who adopts a forest is "free to change the name if they want." He then added: "But most of them you know, they don't! The environment is the one connecting link between all religions" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

To downplay one's socioreligious identity was, however, not always unproblematic. To retain its identity as a local Sikh organization, EcoSikh would normally opt for using Punjabi, the official language of Punjab and a powerful marker of Sikh identity, when self-promoting on social media. English was preferred only in cases of outreach to non-Punjabi-speaking communities. However, they would never use Hindi, perhaps because for some within the Sikh community, Hindi is considered the language of Hindu nationalism.

At other times, the strategy of pragmatic engagement can cause considerable discomfort on the part of individual members. This was evident in a discussion I had with the EcoSikh staff after a trip to a sacred forest adopted by a private Hindu school in the region. When I recounted my visit to the EcoSikh staff, I told them I felt the adopters had expressed an "open-minded" and "tolerant" attitude toward the Sikh community. Even though the adopters were Hindu, I told them, they had kept the EcoSikh sign showcased at the entrance of the small thriving forest, and the adopters had even acknowledged the spiritual role of the forest for Sikhs. I also told them how the adopters had explained their tolerant mindset, explaining how Sikhs were "one of them" (i.e., Hindu). The adopters had said:

> You see, the Sikhs *are* Hindu! Five to six hundred years ago, around that time, they were all Hindus who had to fight the Muslims. Guru Nanak himself was a Hindu, and he was the one who made the Sikhs. They are related to us! Even intermarriages between Hindus and Sikhs happen! … We are all humans (Interview with Forest Adopters, 2022).

The EcoSikh staff, however, dismissed my interpretation and instead saw the adopter's statement as yet another example of the "Hindu assimilation" of Sikhs. However, as an organization, living with statements such as this was the price to pay if their goal was to be reached. The planting of forests as a symbolic act of reverence to Guru Nanak and to save the environment seemed to be more important than the discomfort of the individual.

If EcoSikh was thus pragmatic about how or in what way they emphasized their socioreligious background, they were equally pragmatic in approaching sensitive political issues. This was apparent in how they talked about the question of stubble-burning farmers. North Indian farmers, many of whom are Sikh, are frequently blamed for the extremely toxic levels of air pollution haunting the North Indian plains every winter. When EcoSikh reached out to farmers to address these issues, I was told how much they strive to create a solution in dialogue with the farmers. "We are never saying 'this [stubble burning] is bad,' we are rather trying to start a discussion amongst the farmers" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022). They would also never critique industrialists openly about their blatant pollution, but would much rather change them from "within" and see them plant a forest than start an argument.

EcoSikh was also reluctant to identify as environmental *activists* and would refer to their practice as "doing environmental advocacy." In cases where they were invited along to demonstrations or other confrontational forms of activism, they would politely decline. The aggressiveness associated with activism, the EcoSikh President explained, could have negative consequences as it risked closing many doors to potential allies. This stance had made them unpopular with some of the more vocal and oppositional organizations in the region, but there were other ways of aiding the cause, she stated. This "stepping down from the barricades" did, she admitted, come with the risk that "people feel we are not doing anything. But how do you stop the air pollution? It is through advocacy … We are doing the groundwork, but we are doing it with everyone" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

There were, however, limits to pragmatism, or at least areas where ethical and moral convictions got in the way of compromises for EcoSikh. Some of these limits became evident in a conversation about who could adopt a forest. According to the webpages, "anybody" can adopt a forest, but in practice, EcoSikh was hesitant about collaboration if the reason for adopting a forest was seen to be motivated by greed or personal gain. For example, forests could not be adopted by individuals who privatized community-owned village land for that purpose, and never if EcoSikh sensed that the main intention on the part of the adopter was to harvest the forest or indirectly make money from it, such as is done via the "carbon credit" system in which forests are used to generate tradable credit for the emerging Indian carbon market (Mukherjee 2023). These limits had been set on the back of past experiences, of which the staff told me several stories. As the forest manager

concluded, "So now, if someone shows a very economic interest upon initiating contact, for example asking a lot about the economic value of certain species, then we say that we are sorry, but this might not be for you" (EcoSikh Interviews 2022).

Pragmatic Environmentalism and Its Implications

To appreciate what is specific about EcoSikh's turn to "pragmatic environmentalism," I proceed in this final section to briefly place it in the longer history of environmentalism in postcolonial India, focusing also on the current political context that is increasingly hostile to more confrontational forms of environmentalism.

The non-confrontational approach spearheaded by relatively privileged actors sets it markedly apart from the early Indian environmental movements that have been described as an "environmentalism of the poor" (Guha 1989; Baviskar 1995; Sharma 2012). The iconic forest conservation movement Chipko (1970s), the anti-dam movements such as the Anti-Tehri Dam (1980s) and Narmada Bachao Andolan (1990s), as well as the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project (1990s) all originated in local, environmental struggles over natural resources, with activists boldly addressing distributive and environmental injustices "on the barricades" at great risk. In contrast, contemporary Indian environmentalism has been characterized by Baviskar (2020) as "bourgeois." Performed primarily by a cultural and economic elite, "bourgeois" environmental activism is shaped by the privilege of choice. To the acclamation of "aware" peers, the elite can support the environmental cause without risk or too much effort through donations or social media "likes," by choosing food or activities considered more "sustainable" or "healthy" (see Baviskar, Münster, this volume), or by going "plogging," that is, picking up garbage on the trail while jogging (Kvanneid 2021; Jeshi 2023). This more recent phase (or face) of Indian environmentalism resembles the shift toward a more individualistic form of activism that is popular in China (Qian et al.; Chen and Li, this volume), where the focus lies more on controlling individual practices and self-development (an inward focus) than engaging in collective efforts directed at changing society at large (an outward focus). Both in terms of leadership and forms of activism, EcoSikh shares these distinctively "bourgeois" and "individualistic" traits.

Some may view (and dismiss) EcoSikh's pragmatism not merely as bourgeois, but also as indexing an unwarranted avoidance of, or submission to, important issues that would ruffle the feathers of powerful political and economic actors. Seen in this way, EcoSikh could indeed be described as a "tamed" social movement. This, however, is a process necessary for any social movement that wants to be regarded as a respectable negotiating partner (Chambers et al. 2008, 376), and does not need to imply a loss of agency. Similarly, if we follow Sharma (2014) in seeing

India's contemporary environmental movement as pluralistic and dynamic, and as working along "pragmatic political paths" (Sharma 2012, 263), we may argue that choosing a pragmatic approach for an environmentalist organization is not simply a straightforward reflection of social position, nor is it about conveniently opting out of the tough battles; it is about skillfully navigating the complex realities of colonial and postcolonial processes (Baviskar 1995; Argyrou 2005; Agarwal and Narain 1999), global discourses of sustainable development and climate change (Kvanneid 2021; Swarnakar 2019; Dubash 2019), and powerful cultural and social structures related to class, caste and religion (Sharma 2012; Baviskar 2020; Tomalin 2024). Most importantly, my fieldwork among EcoSikh showed that it was becoming increasingly difficult, even dangerous, to be involved in an idealistic environmental organization in India. This was particularly the case if an environmental initiative was seen as somehow targeting the state, or the national government, and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in particular. In such situations, environmentalists are at best met with hostility and distrust by politicians, local elites, and bureaucrats, and at worst by violent retribution (Dutta and Nielsen 2021, *The Economist* 2024). Swarnakar (2019), for example, has described how members of environmental movements that criticize the government risked being "beaten up, vilified and shot" (Swarnakar 2019, 263). Such events echoed in stories told to me by environmentalists in confidentiality during my fieldwork, indicating that the pragmatic, non-confrontational approach also reflects a fear of reprisals. These stories also suggested that the situation had considerably worsened under BJP rule.

For small environmental initiatives and organizations that depend on goodwill, private savings, random donations, and a good deal of volunteer work, the consequences of "climbing the barricades" could not only spell the end of environmentalism, but could also have serious negative effects on the individual environmentalist and their future career. This indicates that pragmatic environmentalism is at least in part the outcome of conscious decisions among environmentalists who have to navigate a risk-filled political conjuncture.

Concluding Remarks

Small initiatives such as EcoSikh may add up to a large and powerful social movement in an Indian "river of change" toward more sustainable futures, yet at present it is hard to know what course that river might take, or what havoc it may cause on its way. The case study presented in this chapter shows that Sikh teachings and philosophy have been a formative, substantial part of the activism of EcoSikh India, demonstrating how religion can provide both tools and inner motivation for environmental action. However, the case study also shows that

religion—whether as lived life or as philosophy—cannot be isolated from other aspects of everyday life, such as culture, tradition, politics, and power. Highlighting the relations between religious identity and other sociocultural identities, such as caste and class, also demonstrated that Sikhism was not the sole catalyst for environmental action, and that while Sikhism emerged as an enabling factor to EcoSikh's environmental advocacy in some contexts, it was a constraining factor in others. Belonging to a globally oriented, well-educated and privileged segment of an increasingly polarized North Indian society, EcoSikh environmentalists had to reinterpret both how to be an environmentalist, as well as how to be a Sikh. I have argued that understanding how and why these reinterpretations work might reveal something about what enables environmental grassroots movements, and which potential they have for changing structures and practices in the society in which they work. Here, I identified pragmatism as a defining feature of EcoSikh's strategy to enable environmental advocacy across sociocultural and socioreligious divides, and argued that while environmental pragmatism can be seen as an active display of navigational skill, it can also indicate a process of acquiescing to more powerful political actors.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank the editors, Mette Halskov Hansen and Kenneth Bo Nielsen, for their invaluable help in structuring and improving this chapter and its main argument.

[2] These comprised the Nature Science Initiative (Dehradun/Uttarakhand), Plasticvalla (Delhi/Uttarakhand), Healing Himalayas (Haryana/Uttarakhand), and EcoSikh (Ludhiana/Punjab).

[3] The EcoSikh founder may not have been a Khalsa, but Dr. Singh does not exactly represent "an ordinary" Sikh. Among his more prominent resources, he has a large network of Sikh gurdwaras within and outside India (Mooney 2018, 326).

[4] ARC (1996–2019) was a secular network organization that originated in a WWF initiative to explore a coordinated interfaith approach to help religions "develop environmental programs based on their core teachings and practices, creating links between communities of believers and environmental organizations" (Alliance of Religion and Conservation 2019).

[5] *Jagala* (Punjabi), and *Jangal* (Hindi).

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CHAPTER 6

"Purity at the Source": Tzu Chi's Organizational and Communal Storytelling about Recycling and Vegetarianism

Hongtao Li and Lu Chen

Abstract

This chapter investigates the environmental storytelling practices of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi), an international charity organization partly committed to environmental causes. Adopting the perspective of organizational storytelling, we analyze narratives surrounding vegetarianism and recycling, two primary objectives of Tzu Chi's "Purity at the Source" campaign in China. Utilizing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, we explore the stories told and retold at both macro and micro levels. Our findings indicate that storytelling regarding recycling is more prevalent than that of vegetarianism. However, both narratives stem from a shared belief system that justifies initiatives related to recycling and vegetarianism in environmental terms, while simultaneously highlighting the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers as role models for others.

Keywords: China, digital media, volunteers, community building, Buddhism

Introduction

On a warm Sunday afternoon in early November 2023, over twenty individuals, including volunteers from the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation (慈济基金会; Tzu Chi hereafter), several older adults in uniform vests affiliated with the municipal volunteer association, and a dozen residents, assembled in the meeting room of a residents' committee office in Shanghai. While some participants took a break and sipped tea after an hour and a half of recycling activities, a Tzu Chi volunteer in a blue and white uniform invited a boy and a girl to the front to perform a song in sign language, beginning with the lyrics, "Leave our children a clean Earth." The volunteer then turned on a projector and commenced a PowerPoint presentation on "Purity at the Source: Tzu Chi Environmental Protection Education." Finally, those present took turns reading aloud paragraphs from the book *Co-existing with the Earth* by Dhamma Master Cheng Yen who founded Tzu Chi in Taiwan in 1966.

This environmental learning session seamlessly integrated formal, almost ritualistic elements with informal exchanges, serving both educational and social bonding purposes while also being entertaining. The conversation among the participants in the session could be considered a typical kind of "meeting-room talk" (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020). During the session, the storytellers—mostly volunteers—recounted some of Tzu Chi's enduring stories. One notable example was the retelling of Master Cheng Yen's speech about "using the hands you applaud me with to recycle." Additionally, stories about the dedication of the volunteers at the Neihu Recycling Station in Taipei were shared by playing a video clip from Tzu Chi's official television channel, Da Ai (大爱) TV. The session also highlighted local anecdotes created by the small group, and both the Tzu Chi volunteers and local residents expressed their gratitude to Mrs. Chen, the party secretary of the Residents' Committee, for her efforts in establishing this small recycling station in the neighborhood.

This chapter focuses on environmental "storytelling" in Tzu Chi as a way to enhance our understanding of the beliefs and everyday environmental protection practices within this global religious organization. The chapter is mainly based on research done at Tzu Chi's China-based branches, and we analyze and discuss the interplay between global and local storytelling systems, the state-NGO relationship in China, and the potential of social media to facilitate storytelling and community engagement. Local forms of storytelling in Tzu Chi occur in various settings, such as recycling sites, public events, and social media platforms like WeChat groups and Moments. Beyond the local context, the organization has built a comprehensive and extensive storytelling network at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. This network aims to reach a diverse audience, including volunteers, residents, and the general public. Tzu Chi volunteers often refer to their environmental activities as "*zuo huanbao*" (做环保), which means "carrying out environmental protection" (Dung 2021, 67). However, the practice of *zuo huanbao*, we argue, encompasses much more than just "doing"; it also involves "saying" or "telling stories." Storytelling is an integral component of Tzu Chi's environmental initiatives, enhancing the identity of its members, mobilizing volunteers, and engaging the community.

Stories can "open valuable windows into the emotional, political, and symbolic lives of organizations" (Gabriel 2000, 2). Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of organizational storytelling (Boje 1991; Gabriel 2000) and communication infrastructure (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei 2001; Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006), this chapter presents a case study of Tzu Chi's storytelling practices regarding environmental issues. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, we examine the stories being told and retold at both macro- and micro-levels. We analyze how storytellers use legacy and social media to engage their audience and explore the implications of these storytelling practices; and we conclude with

some reflections on the challenges that remain for religious organizations using storytelling as a means to promote civic engagement in environmental work.

Background and the Framework of Storytelling

Tzu Chi is a transnational Buddhist charity organization founded and led by the charismatic nun Dhamma Master Cheng Yen (Weller et al. 2018; Huang 2009). It is a significant part of the humanistic Buddhism movement in Taiwan (Madsen 2008; Greene 2020) that seeks to cultivate inner purity while outwardly practicing Bodhisattva ideals (Tzu Chi 2020a). On a global stage, it is one of the most prominent "religious non-governmental organizations," which refers to "formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level" (Berger 2003, 15). Over the years, it has developed a distinct set of Buddhist practices prioritizing "social activism to provide disaster, poverty, and medical relief to alleviate human suffering, rather than seeking personal religious salvation" (Yang and Huang 2021, 69).

In addition to charity, medicine, education, humanistic culture, and disaster relief, environmental protection is also one of Tzu Chi's core missions. This commitment is deeply intertwined with Tzu Chi's religious principles and teachings. For example, Dhamma Master Cheng Yen employs the Buddhist concept of karma to elucidate the causes of environmental degradation (Yang and Huang 2021). She has asserted, "We have created this karma (the climate disasters) together and must endure the retribution together," urging volunteers to "love the Earth with utmost sincerity." She emphasized that it is "their cultivation, their responsibility" and that "the best way to show their love is to protect the environment" (Tzu Chi 2018). Simultaneously, Tzu Chi's environmental concern is becoming more intertwined with the climate change discourse as a reaction to the growing incidence of natural disasters (Lee and Han 2015). Consequently, Tzu Chi has urged its "global volunteers" to "strive towards reducing their carbon footprint through vegetarianism and environmental efforts" to achieve its 2050 net-zero emissions goal (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2023).

In the early 1990s, Tzu Chi began engaging in recycling activities, which aligned closely with the broader recycling movement in Taiwan (Dung 2021). More generally, Tzu Chi's environmental practice of recycling has both shaped and been shaped by Taiwan's sociopolitical and cultural landscape. For example, the Tzu Chi volunteers' recycling efforts have revitalized communal society by reintroducing what they see as past and more positive work ethics, better labor practices, and

stronger social interactions within neighborhoods (Dung 2021). After three decades, Tzu Chi's recycling initiative has evolved into a comprehensive, global endeavor. According to its latest annual report, it now operates 7,059 recycling stations or community recycling points and has 91,982 certified recycling volunteers in Taiwan (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2023, 73). Globally, the organization operates 8,656 environmental protection stations and community sites in 21 countries and engages 104,314 volunteers dedicated to "taking action to protect the Earth" (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2022, 55).

For Tzu Chi, recycling discarded materials is seen both as a way of creating a Pure Land and as a concrete means of extending the "life of material objects" (Dung 2021, 170; Yang and Huang 2021, 85). This practice embodies a religious connection to Mahayana Buddhist teachings, and echoes the Buddhist concept of "material reincarnation" (Dung 2021, 170, 173). Consequently, Tzu Chi's approach to environmental protection is conceived as a form of Buddhist environmentalism, which has "adapted and adjusted ancient Chinese Buddhist teachings and scriptures to formulate a new religio-environmental ontology" and provides "a living testament to the continued viability, perhaps even desirability, for transcendence in environmental efforts in a secular world" (Yang and Huang 2021, 95–96).

In everyday contexts, however, applying such religio-environmental ontology and translating Mahayana Buddhism into daily organizing practices (Brummans and Hwang, 2010) can be challenging. Tzu Chi therefore actively uses stories and the practice of storytelling as a means to mobilize volunteers and engage the public. The most prominent story regarding recycling has long been the "applauding hands" story mentioned earlier. It unfolds as follows: During a speech on an August evening in 1990, Master Cheng Yen, disturbed by the rubbish scattered across an open-air market she had passed, urged the audience to "use the hands that you applaud me with to pick up rubbish, sweep the streets, and do recycling so that we can turn our land into a Pure Land. By turning trash into gold, we can turn gold into loving hearts" (tzuchi.org.sg. n.d.). According to the story, the speech immediately inspired a twenty-four-year-old woman in the audience to start collecting waste paper in her neighborhood. This act then motivated many others to engage in community recycling throughout Taiwan, eventually sparking a nationwide movement.

This origin story of Tzu Chi's recycling efforts is frequently recounted in the organization's official publications. More importantly, as Dung (2021, 2) observed, it was "almost the standard opening of conversations" that the researcher had had with Tzu Chi commissioners when discussing the organization's history of recycling. Thus, this story is arguably the most "fabled narrative" (Dung 2021, 2) about Tzu Chi's environmental initiatives. It highlights the tributes paid to Master Cheng Yen's leadership and vision, and signifies Tzu Chi's recycling efforts as a "semi-spontaneous, self-motivated, and community-based movement" (Dung 2021, 2).

The story also produced one of Tzu Chi's most significant mantras, "turn trash into gold," which has been pivotal in the organization's attempts to mobilize recycling volunteers. According to the analysis of both media discourses and daily interactions among local Tzu Chi volunteers in Taiwan, this mantra serves as a tool for textualization, substantiation, and invocation across mass media, social media, and face-to-face communication (Brummans, Hwang, and Cheong 2020). Its presence in various organizational settings clearly demonstrates how the terse retelling of an inspirational story helps to perpetuate the organization's ethos and worldview.

Both the "applauding hands" story and the "turn trash into gold" mantra highlight Tzu Chi's identity as a "collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense-making" (Boje 1991, 106). The theoretical perspective of organizational storytelling (Beigi, Callahan, and Michaelson 2019; Boje 1991, 2001; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Gabriel 1991, 1995, 2000) offers valuable insights and conceptual tools to understand "the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (Boje 1991, 106)—in this case, Tzu Chi.

In the organizational context, stories can be understood as "narratives through which events, at times major, at others trivial, become charged with symbolic significance" (Gabriel 1991, 857–58), or as an "oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipating experience" (Boje 1995, 1000). In either form, they play "a fundamental role in the creation and reproduction of organizational reality" (Mumby 1988, 18) and serve several critical functions, including sense-making, social control and resistance, forming individual and group identities, and facilitating knowledge sharing and learning (Fotaki, Altman, and Koning 2020). Additionally, stories are often imbued with strong emotions, making them integral components of organizational culture (Gabriel 2000).

There is an extensive body of literature on organizational storytelling, which cannot be fully reviewed in this chapter. (For a recent review, see Beigi, Callahan, and Michaelson 2019). It is sufficient to note that organizational storytelling enables researchers to access "deeper organizational realities, closely linked to their members' experiences" (Gabriel 2000, 2). However, this scholarship has several blind spots, including an oversight of the setting (Van Hulst and Ybema 2019) or context of the storytelling, insufficient attention to underrepresented groups in the organization and of competing organizational identities, and a need to address technological developments and social media storytelling (Fotaki, Altman, and Koning 2020).

In light of these challenges, this chapter will adopt a setting-sensitive approach to organizational storytelling to analyze the actual telling of stories, or the "storytelling in situ" (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020). This approach considers organizational

storytelling as a "situated activity" (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 366) embedded in specific organizational settings, defined as "the place- and time-bound contexts in which particular social-material practices with particular purposes occur" (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 367). Under this approach, stories and storytelling vary significantly across different settings within the organization, and each setting—whether it be meeting rooms, canteens, workstations, or closed-door rooms—combines story tellability, story triggers, story forms, and story work in its unique way (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 383).

First, we examine the Chinese context in which Tzu Chi operates and its impact on both macro- and micro-level forms of storytelling. Despite its religious origins and belief systems, Tzu Chi operates in an entirely non-political way, which has enabled it to expand its operations into both China and North Korea (King 2020). The environmental shift in China has provided strategic opportunities for environmental NGOs to survive and thrive (Yang 2005; Cooper 2006; Zeng, Dai, and Javed 2019) and contribute to the development of a green public sphere (Yang and Calhoun 2007). Tzu Chi volunteers have capitalized on these political opportunities in China to promote recycling and environmental education, securing official recognition and legitimacy (Chen and Hansen 2022). However, NGOs, particularly religious NGOs, must navigate the complexities of an authoritarian regime, maintaining a precarious relationship with the state. This dynamic has resulted in a form of embedded activism or embedded environmentalism (Ho 2001; Ho and Edmonds 2007).

Second, we explore both top-down and bottom-up storytelling arguing that storytellers actively utilize different media and story genres. They not only reproduce master narratives like the "applauding hands" story and the "turn trash into gold" mantra, but also creatively tell and circulate their own stories.

Finally, since Tzu Chi is a community and volunteer-based organization, our discussion extends from the organizational level to the community level, incorporating the dimension of communal storytelling into our inquiry. According to Ball-Rokeach and her colleagues (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei 2001, 392–93), storytelling processes, particularly in urban settings, enable individuals and groups to participate in communication activities that create both subjective and objective senses of belonging. Such processes of neighborhood storytelling can help to transform individuals from mere urban residents or dwellers into more active neighborhood members. By combining the study of organizational storytelling in Tzu Chi and the communication infrastructure in the local setting of Tzu Chi branches in China, we can explore Tzu Chi's storytelling practices at both macro- and micro-levels, and within and beyond the organizational boundaries. This helps us understand how Tzu Chi works in China, seeking to engage their own members, volunteers, local community residents, and the general public.

Methods

This chapter focuses on the "Purity at the Source" (清净在源头) campaign, which was launched by Tzu Chi in different countries and areas including China in early 2020 with two main objectives: promoting vegetarianism (加素) and reducing plastic usage (减塑), and we explore storytelling related to these two. The campaign is named after a book by Master Cheng Yen and underscores the clear religious connection between recycling practices and Mahayana Buddhist teachings (Dung 2021, 170).

Our empirical analysis begins with Tzu Chi's macro-level storytelling through its official publications and other media. Tzu Chi has established a hybrid media system and comprehensive communication networks under the auspices of their Mission of Humanistic Culture. This includes legacy media such as magazine publications and their Da Ai TV station, as well as new media outlets, all serving as macro-level storytellers to "purify the human mind, pacify our society, help those who suffer, and rectify frenzied and chaotic acts" (Tzu Chi n.d.). The media system has also expanded to China, where Tzu Chi set up a verified Weibo account in May 2012 and later a WeChat public account. Since 2012 the Weibo account has published over 1,700 posts and attracted half a million followers.

For this article, we examined Tzu Chi's official website and systematically reviewed its WeChat posts for promotion messages of the campaign and stories about vegetarianism and recycling. We also conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews to understand Tzu Chi's storytelling about recycling and vegetarianism at the local level. Between January 2020 and July 2024, the two authors visited two local branches in Shanghai and Hangzhou. We participated in their activities, and after connecting with Tzu Chi volunteers, we joined three WeChat groups: one related to vegetarianism with around 190 users, one focused on recycling with two hundred members, and one centered on an outdoor environmental education event with over fifty members. As one of the authors (Chen) has been researching Tzu Chi's environmental practices since 2020, this study also builds on previous research experience, including interviews.

"A Love for the Earth": Storytelling about Recycling

The storytelling surrounding recycling, as exemplified by Tzu Chi's "Purity at the Source" campaign, notably downplays religious ideals and elements to emphasize global concerns, such as climate change, and China's national policy on garbage sorting. At the local level, grassroots volunteers, who serve as the primary storytellers, actively utilize social media to retell and adapt these macro-level

narratives. Simultaneously, they share their personal stories to create local role models, strengthen the bond among recycling participants, and foster a sense of compassion.

At the macro level, Tzu Chi integrates the campaign in China into its global narrative by recounting the origin story of its engagement in environmental protection. For instance, a news article covering the campaign's launch ceremony in a local neighborhood in Guangzhou characteristically begins with, "In 1990, Dharma Master Cheng Yen called for 'using applauding hands to protect the environment.'" This introduction to the local campaign immediately situates the current program within a longstanding tradition in Tzu Chi, reaffirming the organization's pioneering role in environmental protection.

Tzu Chi also aligns the program's "Reducing Plastic" objective with the Chinese state-initiated garbage sorting and recycling campaigns. In the news article, a local official in Guangzhou delivered a speech at the campaign's launch ceremony, commending Tzu Chi for guiding community residents in separating and recycling garbage. The official also urged everyone to take personal responsibility and collaborate to improve waste sorting. At the event, the local branch of Tzu Chi also prepared display boards about garbage sorting, introducing the government's system of a four-color classification scheme: green for food waste, blue for recyclables, and so on.

Importantly, from Tzu Chi's macro-level storytelling a master narrative has emerged that aligns with China's national policy on garbage sorting. Tzu Chi consciously collaborates closely with the local government and seeks to establish an extensive network of community volunteers who also work strictly according to the guidelines of the government, as demonstrated in the following story:

> Every Saturday, [Tzu Chi volunteers] tirelessly advocate for waste recycling and environmental protection within the community. Their persistent efforts over the past eight years have gained recognition from community residents and strong support from the property management company. In appreciation, the company provided the volunteers with a ten-square-meter house and an adjacent fifteen-square-meter open-air garden, free of charge. The volunteers raised their own funds to renovate the house into a Tzu Chi environmental protection station. Since then, they have had a home within the community—a shelter from the wind and rain. (Tzu Chi 2020b)

Interestingly, this is a local story with unnamed protagonists. Nonetheless, it was solicited and shared by Tzu Chi's WeChat public account, which serves as a national platform for storytelling. Essentially, it is a local story with national implications, focusing on community engagement and bonding. Within China's political and ideological contexts, Tzu Chi employs discursive strategies such as downplaying

religious elements, aligning with state programs, and highlighting the positive impact on local communities in its macro-level storytelling to enhance the legitimacy of both the campaign and the organization.

Storytelling at the local level is not isolated from macro-level narratives and the broader context of communication action. As we have seen, local storytellers sometimes incorporate materials from the macro-level storytelling system into their own local stories and they also invite prominent figures featured in legacy media, particularly role models, to local events as special guests, facilitating the movement of stories from macro- to local-level settings.

For instance, on a Friday evening in mid-April 2024, the environmental learning session of the local recycling group in Shanghai invited Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong to share her story of establishing recycling stations in Putian, Fujian. Her story has been covered by Tzu Chi's WeChat public account in China (Tzu Chi 2020b) and its official TV channel, Da Ai TV. After telling her story, Ming Qiong had the following exchange with the hosting volunteer:

Teacher-Sister Lian Hua:	You have to take care of two granddaughters. With so much work at home and the small diner for breakfast, how do you find time (for recycling)?
Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong:	I make full use of my sleeping hours. I sleep very little, sometimes only four hours a day. So, I use the time that others spend sleeping to *zuo huanbao*. When my granddaughter was little, I used to place her in a basket or sit her in front of me and take her along in my pedicab when I went recycling.

The vivid image of Ming Qiong placing her baby granddaughter into a basket also appears in Da Ai TV's coverage, which was shown at the end of the learning session. The interviewer had also pointed out that Ming Qiong was a true grassroots volunteer, an ordinary citizen who was dedicated beyond expectations and thus stood out as a model for others to emulate.

This story is one of many that highlights how Tzu Chi consciously and skillfully employs numerous forms of storytelling, both in the form of people telling stories directly to other people during in-person events, or using digital media, including video transfer, internet presentations, and broadcasts on their Da Ai TV station—a Taiwanese broadcast station that is restricted in China. Still, most of the storytelling at the local level involves people and events within the community. These stories are mostly about individual volunteers, and they often take the form of educational sessions where more experienced volunteers guide newcomers to gain the "correct" understanding of the recycling activities, as illustrated in the following

conversation between several volunteers during a recycling session. This was taken from a video clip uploaded by one of the volunteers to the WeChat Group:

Teacher-Sister Xu Yu:	I knew little about environmental protection. I knew we could collect and sell recyclables like cardboard to help those in need. I did not fully understand the genuine concern of environmental protection. The real problem is, uh, stop…
Teacher-Sister A:	Polluting the Earth
Teacher-Sister Xu Yu:	Uh, polluting the Earth. Be able to…
Teacher-Sister B:	Be able to use as little as possible.
Teacher-Sister A:	Teacher-Sister Xu Yu, you shared the story about the disposable gloves with me. Could you please tell it again?
Teacher-Sister Xu Yu:	One of our young women, when she uses chopsticks to cook food, the oil splashes on her hands, so she wears disposable gloves and throws them away when she is done using them. I said, "I can still use them after you finish; we can reuse them for washing clothes and cleaning." She replied, "There are plenty of them. We have several boxes at home." I stopped complaining, but whenever she throws them away, I pick them up for reuse … it is also like these plastic bags (she is holding a black one). We do not need to recycle and reuse. We can use them repeatedly … (looking toward Teacher-Sister B) What you shared was terrific; it resonated with me. (Now I understand) We are not recycling for money but to protect the environment.
Teacher-Sister A:	That is really great!

At first glance, this may not seem like a natural conversation. In reality, it was initiated by Teacher-Sister A, who prompted Teacher-Sister Xu Yu to share her thoughts on recycling and recount the story about the disposable gloves. As the conversation indicates, Teacher-Sister Xu Yu initially perceived recycling as a charitable activity. However, she then learned from the more experienced volunteers to view it from Tzu Chi's perspective of recycling as a practical and symbolic act of protecting the Earth. The exchange is educational for both Teacher-Sister Xu Yu and the other volunteers who were present.

Teacher-Sister A recorded the conversation by using a mobile phone. The footage was subsequently uploaded to the WeChat group, along with a paragraph summarizing and introducing the video clip: "Teacher-Sister Xu Yu once viewed recycling primarily as a way to make donations to schools. Now, she understands that environmental protection is motivated by a love for the Earth."

Thanks to information and communication technologies, particularly mobile devices and digital media, local storytelling is no longer a fleeting event. It can seamlessly transition from offline to online. On a Friday evening in late March 2024, Teacher-Sister Lian Hua posted the following message in the WeChat group:

> I heard this story today: Teacher-Sister Fufan has a connection with a local barbershop. She asks the shop to save their paper, PET bottles, and plastic containers, which she collects daily or every other day. A girl named Mickey at the barber shop saves these items for her. Recently, Fufan has had to attend to some family matters. The young people at the barbershop were concerned that Fufan might become exhausted from collecting and washing those containers. To lighten her burden, they decided to throw away half of the plastic containers from takeaway food.
>
> When Teacher-Sister Fufan found out, she told Mickey that if they wanted to leave her only one type of container, she would prefer the plastic ones. She explained that someone would pick up paper boxes for recycling (and earn money from it), but nobody would pick up plastic containers, which would eventually become dry garbage. She requested that they not throw away plastic containers in the future.

The story carries multiple layers of meaning and implications. It highlights Teacher-Sister Fufan's passion and commitment to environmental protection, and it depicts a close relationship among Tzu Chi volunteers, the young barbershop staff, and the wider community. The story also distinguishes Tzu Chi's broader societal vision from the commercial business which focuses more on the economic value of recyclables than on the environmental impact of waste. The moral message at the end—do not throw away plastic containers—reflects the main message that volunteers wish to convey to the community residents. Therefore, on hearing the story in a later online environmental learning session, Teacher-Sister Lian Hua shared it in the WeChat group and two days later, Teacher-Sister Fufan retold the story at the recycling site, and uploaded a new video clip to the WeChat group.

By producing and circulating such stories featuring local figures as protagonists, storytellers like Teacher-Sister Lian Hua and others make Tzu Chi narratives meaningful for both Tzu Chi volunteers and for local community members.

Food Speaks for Itself: Storytelling about Vegetarianism

Tzu Chi's macro-level storytelling on vegetarianism has evolved from emphasizing the Buddhist principle of "all living creatures are equal" (众生平等) to addressing concerns about the climate crisis. On the very first day of its inception, May 7, 2012,

Tzu Chi's Weibo account posted ten tweets. Among these was a touching story about a volunteer's journey to vegetarianism:

> Chen Chiou-Hwa used to consume a great deal of meat, often splitting a whole chicken in half to share with others. However, after learning about Dharma Master Cheng Yen's teachings, which emphasize that all living creatures are equal in the first place (众生本平等), he changed his dietary habits. Nowadays, he frequently eats rice with peanuts. This significant shift in his lifestyle often moves his wife to tears.

The tweet includes a link to the full story on Tzu Chi's official website in Taiwan. It is written in traditional Chinese characters as normally used only in Taiwan and Hongkong, suggesting it was an exact copy of a message posted on Tzu Chi's Facebook page the previous day. It is an example of using Buddhist ideals to justify people's personal conversion to vegetarian diets.

In 2016, Tzu Chi launched a global campaign for vegetarianism, which retained some aspects of the organization's religious ideals, such as respecting all living beings, and, at the same time, placed a stronger emphasis on the positive environmental impacts of a vegetarian diet. January 11th was designated as a "global day of awareness that draws mindful attention to the impact our personal choices as a society can have on the environment, wildlife, and each other" (Tzu Chi USA n.d.). In Chinese, it was initially named "111, Global Day for Vegetarian Eating" (111, 全球茹素日) and later renamed "Vegetarian Awakening Day" (蔬醒日). As the name suggests, it signifies a day dedicated to vegetarianism using slogans like "vegetarianism can save the planet" and that "we can slow down global warming, starting with you and me" (Chen and Zhang 2016). As part of the global campaign, the Tzu Chi organization in Shanghai further utilized "111" to illustrate their objectives: "1 person, 1 meatless day, 1 Earth," aiming to make "'111' and 'vegetarian awakening' part of the global lexicon" (Tzu Chi 2017). In English, the proposed name of the day was Ethical Eating Day, which refers to "choosing a vegetarian diet and locally produced food because such personal choices prevent global warming and combat climate change" (Tzu Chi USA n.d.).

The campaign in Taiwan and China focused solely on promoting vegetarianism, whereas Tzu Chi USA expanded its agenda to include eating locally grown food, to align with the locavore movement of ethical eating in North America. Nonetheless, the main rationale behind the introduction of the global day of awareness of food consumption is the science that shows how a transition to plant-based diets and preference for locally produced seasonal food can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and thus help to slow global warming. At the same time, the campaign was based on the Buddhist principle that "all living creatures are equal." For instance, a pamphlet titled "Environmental Heart Map 5.0" circulated among the

Tzu Chi volunteers argues that vegetarianism offers three key benefits: mitigating climate change, improving human health, and fostering love and respect for animals and all living beings (Tzu Chi 2018).

In the "Purity at the Source" campaign, community-based recycling efforts and the personal choice of vegetarianism converge in the slogan, "Loving Earth by Going Vegetarian and Reducing Plastics." Tzu Chi has developed a specially designed WeChat applet for "daily attendance" (打卡) that encourages users to engage in environmentally friendly activities on a daily basis, including "sorting garbage," "eating everything on your plate," "reducing plastic usage," and "choosing a vegetarian diet." However, compared to the goal of reducing plastics, the vegetarian agenda was significantly downplayed in the overarching narrative of the campaign. In the previously mentioned WeChat article about the campaign's launching ceremony, all sign-language and drama performances, comments by local authorities, and on-site exhibitions focused exclusively on garbage sorting and recycling. Vegetarianism was mentioned only once, through a single picture showcasing a table full of delicious vegetarian dishes carefully prepared by the volunteers for the guests. The food seems to speak for itself, offering guests "a good taste of the beauty of 'going vegetarian'" (Tzu Chi 2020b). One reason for this downplaying might have been the difficulty in relating vegetarianism to any officially sanctioned national policy, such as garbage sorting.

The coverage of Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong's story (mentioned in the previous section) by Da Ai TV and on Tzu Chi's WeChat public account highlights a stark contrast in the visibility of recycling versus vegetarianism. In its prime-time program, Da Ai TV dedicated two and a half minutes to Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong, starting her environmental, "*zuo huanbao*" story with the following scene:

Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong:	I participate in environmental protection every day. I haven't taken a single day off.
Voiceover:	When Ming Qiong talks about environmental protection, she fully commits herself to the cause. The first step she took was to transform her family's breakfast dinner by eliminating meat from the menu.
Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong:	… I convinced my husband to stop eating meat, explaining that a vegetarian diet is healthier. When he agreed, I was overjoyed and committed myself to a completely vegetarian lifestyle.
Voiceover:	Twenty years ago, Wu Ming Qiong moved to Taiwan for work. Following the Wenchuan Earthquake, she encountered Tzu Chi, which ignited her journey into environmental protection.

The story then continues with Ming Qiong committing herself to recycling activities. A WeChat story titled "A Day Without Environmental Action Is a Day Reduced in Life" follows up on the story about Ming Qiong, but it does not mention the parts about conversion to a vegetarian menu but focuses exclusively on Ming Qiong's recycling activities (Tzu Chi 2020c). Ultimately, Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong is portrayed solely as a role model for recycling.

Other examples of micro-level storytelling within the recycling group in Shanghai appears to follow the same pattern. Volunteers and community residents often enjoy fruits and vegetarian food when they take a break from recycling, but discussions about vegetarianism rarely emerge in either on-site conversations, the group chat, or other local forms of storytelling. The only exception occurred in late August 2024, when a volunteer posted a picture of a plate of well-packaged vegetarian dumplings along with the following message:

> We are so grateful for Mama Du's delicious food; it made us very happy! Members of our eco-friendly family ate with great joy. We are thankful for your love and care. Your feet must be numb from the hour-long bike ride back and forth—it's really hard on you! We are truly touched by your efforts and deeply admire your care and support of the environmental protection volunteers. We appreciate the matchless charitable work you have done (功德无量)!

Other participants in the recycling session posted similar messages of gratitude. Collectively, they told the story of Mama Du, the mother of one of the core volunteers, who prepared vegetarian dumplings and mung bean lily soup at home and delivered them to the recycling station on her electric bicycle. While dumplings and soup were vegetarian, the actual focus of the story is actually the loving Mama Du, and the main thread of the narrative is the importance of showing parental support for children's and family members' environmental protection efforts—a concept of family which extends to other members of the recycling group. Vegetarianism, particularly its connection to environmental concerns, is assumed and kept in the background.

Our final example of storytelling in the "Purity at the Source" campaign happened at one of the environmental education events organized by Tzu Chi. These educational sessions constitute important sites for volunteers to create and share stories and, again, the two main areas of environmental concern, the importance of recycling and the benefits of vegetarianism, are foregrounded. For instance, in April 2024, a local branch of Tzu Chi in Hangzhou organized a six-hour outdoor environmental education event open to the public and focused on garbage pick-up and environmental advocacy. During this event, volunteers prepared a rich vegetarian lunch for all the participants. Before the meal commenced, the hosting volunteer invited the volunteers who had cooked to come forward and led the

group in applauding and singing in appreciation of their efforts. The participants then followed the other Tzu Chi volunteers in raising their thumbs in gratitude. The host explained how these dedicated volunteers had traveled from a distant city district early in the morning to prepare the meal.

As people queued for the buffet-style vegetarian food, they sang the "Gratitude Song," a short four-line piece that emphasizes the challenges of obtaining vegetarian food and encourages everyone to savor and appreciate it and be thankful to "all living creatures" (众生) with their whole hearts. After lunch, some volunteers invited the participants to share their reflections on the event in the seminar room. Some of the children expressed their delight with the delicious food and thanked the volunteers who cooked.

The event concluded with the distribution of gifts and vegetarian desserts. Each participant received a wooden ornament inscribed with the words, "Collective goodness of vegetarian food to protect the Earth" (蔬食共善护大地). Throughout and after the event, both volunteers and participants posted photos, videos, and comments on the WeChat group created specifically for the occasion. Reflecting on the vegetarian food provided, one volunteer noted that the meal was crafted with compassion and love for oneself, families, and the Earth.

At this particular educational event, vegetarianism seemed to be a crucial element. The volunteers made a concerted effort to emphasize the significance of vegetarianism, and much like Mama Du's story, the cooking volunteers' narratives revolved around themes of compassion and gratitude. These stories were aimed at underscoring the volunteers' dedication to the environmental cause, in hopes of inspiring a similar sense of compassion among the event's attendees. For the Tzu Chi volunteers and participants, expressing gratitude to volunteer cooks and others in the broader community may help motivate them to practice vegetarianism and cultivate compassion—this is at least the hope of the organizers in Tzu Chi. In terms of emotional impact, some of the participants expressed their gratitude and motivation to further involve in Tzu Chi's practices. However, it remains to be seen how such emotional impact can further transform participants' behavior in everyday life.

Conclusion

Similar to the "Purity at the Source" campaigns that were launched earlier in Taiwan and Singapore, the campaign in China was launched in early January 2020. In hindsight, the timing was unfortunate, as the COVID-19 pandemic erupted only weeks later. Consequently, most outdoor activities, including recycling, had to be suspended and resumed only after the pandemic subsided. Interestingly, in response

to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tzu Chi USA launched the Very Veggie Movement (VVM) in early 2020. This reflected that for Tzu Chi, the connection between COVID-19 and the Huanan Wet Market "amplified the case for vegetarianism," and "what began as a wake-up call through the emergence of COVID-19 has now turned into a dietary revolution" (Shatursun 2021, 34). Adopting a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle is believed by Tzu Chi to "save millions of animals every year," "reduce the environmental impact of animal farming," and "minimize the outbreak of the next animal-borne disease" like SARS and COVID-19 (VVM n.d.). Although we observed how the Tzu Chi volunteers associated vegetarianism with COVID-19 to promote vegetarianism, we have not come across messages related to the US-based Very Veggie Movement in either Tzu Chi's official discourse or local-level storytelling.

Although environmental work, or "*zuo huanbao*" was largely suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tzu Chi's many forms of storytelling continued through both legacy and social media and at the macro- and micro-levels. In this chapter, we employed the perspective of organizational storytelling to explore Tzu Chi's stories about and storytelling on recycling and vegetarianism in particular. Building on previous analyses of Tzu Chi's official discourse and the power of origin stories and simple mantras, we examined the dynamics of storytelling with a particular focus on local storytellers and their practices in various settings. This exploration aimed to understand the interplay between the global and the local, the macro and the micro.

As the analysis indicates, storytellers at various levels generate a diverse range of stories; some are brief, while others are more comprehensive with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Notable differences exist between the stories and storytelling practices related to recycling and vegetarianism. Storytelling about recycling, both at the macro and micro levels, is more prevalent than that of vegetarianism. This disparity likely arises from the absence of national policies or programs specifically addressing vegetarianism, unlike those for garbage sorting and reducing plastic use, which provide a framework for recycling-related stories. Moreover, for Tzu Chi and its volunteers, adopting a vegetarian diet is largely a personal choice tied to self-cultivation, making crafting and sharing stories about vegetarianism more challenging.

However, this does not mean there are no commonalities or ties between the two sets of stories. Both derive from a shared belief system. Regardless of the content of the stories, they convey similar messages and meanings with practical and moral implications. First, both macro- and micro-level storytelling justify initiatives and actions related to recycling and vegetarianism in environmental terms. Second, due to the political and ideological context, storytelling at both levels downplays religious messages but, at the same time, emphasizes the leadership and vision of Dharma Master Cheng Yen. Third, a common theme in most stories is the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers as role models for others, including both Tzu Chi

members and ordinary residents, as well as their compassion for the community and the wider world.

Our case study also offers general insights into religious NGOs, with implications for other similar organizations, and demonstrates the potential of a storytelling perspective. Conceptually, we can distinguish between macro-level discourse and micro-level storytelling practices. However, these are not isolated but closely intertwined. The macro level provides symbolic resources for the micro level, while the micro level substantiates master narratives in everyday life and practices. At the micro level, the storytellers, primarily volunteers, actively engage in storytelling. They not only reproduce and appropriate macro-level stories but also create their own, featuring volunteers and local residents as protagonists to tell stories about their neighborhood. The media play an essential role in both macro- and micro-level storytelling. Tzu Chi has established a sophisticated media system, also in China, over the past decades, and local storytellers actively utilize devices such as mobile phones, as well as platforms like WeChat groups and Tencent Meetings, navigating between physical and virtual spaces. This is largely attributable to the widespread use of information and communication technologies, social media, and the media literacy and tech-savvy capabilities of the participants.

For Tzu Chi's commissioners and volunteers, storytelling offers practical guidance that informs their actions. More importantly, it strengthens their identity and fosters emotional bonds among them. For neighborhood residents, storytelling serves an educational purpose, particularly in teaching how to achieve "purity at the source" by reusing disposables or adopting vegetarian diets. Additionally, it is performative, showcasing the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers and their connection with the local community.

However, despite efforts by local storytellers to involve residents in their narratives, many of those in the WeChat group—especially those who do not participate in recycling but provide recyclables for volunteers—often remain silent during conversations and storytelling sessions. This silence indicates that fostering neighborhood storytelling and civic engagement in China remains a challenging task.

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CHAPTER 7

Agroecology as Christian Environmentalism in a Hindu Majoritarian Context

Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Nihar Gokhale

Abstract

This chapter analyzes the environmental and agroecological engagements of the Catholic Church and Goan Christians in a context defined by the rise and consolidation of an assertive and aggressive Hindu majoritarian politics in large parts of India. Focusing on the state of Goa, we demonstrate how environmentalist initiatives in the form of agroecology and community farming have emerged as politically acceptable forms of public engagement and activism. These activities, we argue, signal a greening of the Catholic Church that simultaneously enables it to retain an important public voice and a position of social leadership in an otherwise hostile political context.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism; Goa; community farming; Catholicism

> There is an emergency before humankind: the emergency of preserving this world to subsequent generations. There is a challenge before us which needs to be addressed without wasting time: the challenge of preserving clean air, clean water, hills and forests, fields and rivers. The more we delay to listen to the cry of God's creation, the further we walk the path of self-destruction … Keeping aside all differences let us all join hands in protecting God's creation. As members of the Church, each one of us has the responsibility and the duty to safeguard creation. Let us fulfil them with diligence (Archdiocese of Goa and Daman 2021, 31–32).

In this chapter, we focus on the environmental engagements of the Catholic Church in the Indian state of Goa. As our opening quotation from the Archbishop of Goa and Daman's pastoral letter from 2021–2022 indicates, concerns with the current environmental crisis figure high on the agenda of the Church in Goa, as indeed it does for the Catholic Church at large, and for most other world religions.

The purpose of focusing on what we in this chapter refer to as Christian environmentalism (see Quinsey 2024) in the specific context of Goa is to analyze how the Catholic Church and Goan Christians have sought to navigate a rapidly changing political context characterized by the rise and consolidation of an assertive Hindu majoritarian politics that defines and targets religious minorities in India

as "anti-national Others." Indeed, with the rise of Hindu nationalist politics across India, forms of public assertion by religious minority groups that can be construed as "political" increasingly invite reprisals from the Hindu right, leading to a considerable shrinking of the space for social outreach and activism. We argue that Christian environmentalism emerges, in this context, as a politically acceptable form of public outreach that enables the Catholic Church to retain an important public voice and a position of social leadership, despite the narrowing political space.

Environmental questions and the protection of Goa's ecology have been part of the Church's agenda for some time, but they have, tellingly, assumed even greater importance in recent years as the Church has actively engaged in issues of environmental sustainability and the protection of Goa's air, water, hills, forests, fields, and rivers, to paraphrase the archbishop's pastoral letter. Environmental issues are widely endorsed by the Catholic Church globally, as epitomized in Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, as well as by political authorities in India, at least rhetorically, and by most Goans irrespective of creed and confession due to widely shared popular concerns about environmental degradation. This imbues environmentalism with a significant degree of religious, social, and political legitimacy and acceptability. Within the Church's general reorientation towards environmental issues, however, we find that agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation have received particular attention. We argue that the attractiveness of practicing Christian environmentalism through agroecology is twofold. First, a turn to agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation enables the Church to engage with and address pressing local issues related to the degradation of soil, the overuse of chemicals, and the toxicity of food, as well as the locally unpopular large-scale diversion of Goan lands for non-agricultural purposes. At the same time, the attractiveness of agroecology is also derived from the fact that not all forms of environmentalism are equally legitimate in the eyes of governments and politicians who remain firmly committed to furthering neoliberal restructuring with a strong pro-business orientation—an orientation that is endorsed by Hindu nationalist governments both regionally and nationally. In light of this, localized agroecological initiatives emerge, we suggest, as politically more acceptable forms of Christian environmentalism because they can be more easily framed as "apolitical"; as posing no direct threat to the broader processes of capitalist accumulation; and even as secular.

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by offering a brief account of the role of the Catholic Church in Goan society, focusing especially on its postcolonial transformation and showing how the championing of new social, political, and environmental issues was part of this transformation. We subsequently discuss the current political conjuncture marked by the rise of Hindu nationalism both nationally and in Goa, documenting how this has worked to severely circumscribe the political space available to actors associated or affiliated with the Church. The final

sections analyze the Church's turn to agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation as a response not only to the global environmental crisis, but also to more localized political and economic developments. While this turn is arguably underpinned by theologically grounded ideas of responsible stewardship and an ethics or "culture" of care for God's creation (see DeWitt 2016), the case study from Goa that we offer highlights not so much the ideational and motivational aspect of Christianity as faith, but rather emphasizes the crucial importance of Church institutions, personnel, and knowledge networks in mobilizing and organizing local communities around community farming.[1]

The Transformations of the Catholic Church in Goa

While Christianity had a sporadic presence in those parts of India that today constitute Goa prior to the commencement and consolidation of Portuguese colonialism, the Catholic Church as an institution only arrived alongside the Portuguese colonizers in the sixteenth century. The longer history of the consolidation of Catholicism in Goa is not our central concern here, but it is nonetheless important to stress how the Christianization of Goa was intimately intertwined with processes of colonial state formation. As the historian Celsa Pinto (2023, 127) argues with reference to the first centuries of Portuguese colonial rule in Goa, "the Church and State worked hand in hand … to fulfil the obligations imposed on them by the Pope and their King. Together by coercion and indoctrination they brought about the Christianization of Goa and eventually the consolidation of Portuguese rule." Indeed, such was the consolidation and institutional density of Catholicism in colonial Goa that it became known as the "Rome of the East" and emerged as a globally important center for Christianity.

Although the relationship between the colonial state and the Catholic Church in Goa was arguably more complex and contradictory than what Pinto's summary assessment allows for, the Church hierarchy and its institutions did indeed support the colonial government and aligned with Goa's ruling classes right up to the time of the departure of the Portuguese in 1961 (D'Mello 2018, 216). The Church itself was an important locus of economic and political power and an influential social institution in which Catholic Brahmins that constituted the colonial elite played a disproportionately influential role. Today, the Church continues to run a large network of schools, orphanages, and old age homes, and still owns a number of properties and agricultural lands across the state. This makes the Catholic Church in Goa very different from many other Christian churches of various denominations in other parts of India, whose situation is often precarious and whose followers are overwhelmingly drawn from poorer and marginalized segments of Indian society.[2]

When Portuguese colonialism came to an end in 1961, the Church sought to adapt to a radically changed context by gradually embarking on a transformative process that saw it move from "trying to be where the ruler was, to being where the laity was," as Abreu puts it (2020, 3). As part of its postcolonial transformation, Goa's Catholic clergy and organizations have, therefore, become increasingly involved "in the struggles of the common man striving for a more equitable society" (D'Mello 2018, 215). The end of Portuguese colonialism in Goa, importantly, coincided with the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), held from 1962 to 1965. These two events, in combination, would propel the Church toward taking up social, political, and environmental causes. According to some respondents interviewed for this chapter, the Church in Goa endorsed the mission of Vatican II with great zeal. More specifically, at a seminar organized by the Church on its evolving role in Goan society in 2003, the Archbishop Felipe Neri Ferrao traced the social "transformation" of the Church to the Second Vatican Council and to a seminar held by the Church in Goa in 1968 to discuss the implications of the Council for the Church's future. The seminar concluded with a commitment that the church would involve itself more in social issues.

At that time, the Church also came to see politics as an important aspect of its work toward social justice. As one respondent from the Church put it:

> After Vatican II, which was the rethinking in the Church, the Church saw it more important to emphasize on social justice issues and get involved. It was this whole thinking of what is the church in the modern world. [And] because politics influences injustices, if those are to be tackled then we also have to look at the political establishment that is there.

Among the concrete initiatives taken toward this end was the Diocesan Service Centre for Social Action, set up in the 1970s and renamed the Centre for Social Justice and Peace in 2005. The social action component in the Church's activities was further energized by Catholic students. In the 1970s, Goan university campuses were politicized (much like the rest of India). Many of the students were Catholic and trained by the Jesuits in the All-India Catholic Universities Federation (AICUF), formerly named the Catholic Students Union. This training was influenced by liberation theology from Latin America, which drew inspiration from the Second Vatican Council as well as from Marxist and peasant movements. In India, the AICUF took students for "immersion" tours to rural areas, and through this many urban and elite Catholics from Goa were exposed to poverty and social justice issues.

As mentioned, part of the Church's postcolonial transformation was to become involved in a series of social, economic, and political issues and struggles. Sometimes this has taken the form of individual priests supporting specific political parties in light of concrete issues, either openly by encouraging Catholics to vote in certain ways, or less openly by allowing Church property, including Church

compounds and buildings, to be used for political meetings by some parties and groups, but not by others (D'Mello 2018, 220). Priests have also delivered political speeches from the pulpits or openly marched in the streets with the laity during political rallies (Abreu 2020, 31).

At other times, the Church has been involved in social and popular movements with few explicit party political connections, supporting, for example, traditional (and often Catholic) fishing communities protesting the ravages of mechanized trawling; supporting Konkani as the official state language; backing NGOs protesting the destructive impact of mass tourism on local environments and culture; joining hands with activists opposing railway and airport expansion and the setting up of polluting industries and special economic zones (D'Mello 2018; Nielsen 2017; Nielsen, Da Silva and Bedi 2022; Bedi 2013; Sampat 2015); and agitating against corrupt land use planning practices (Da Silva, Nielsen and Bedi 2020). The list of issues taken up by the Church is long and also includes raising awareness about human rights; environmental protection; the rights of children, women, and the marginalized; the need for a peaceful and just society; corruption; religious freedom; and inter-religious dialogue (Abreu 2020, 35). D'Mello (2018, 225) interprets the many social and political engagements of the postcolonial Church as indicating a "broadening of the vision of the Church," and a shift away from a somewhat narrow focus on supporting largely Catholic interests "to something which is broader and concerns [Goan] society at large." Abreu (2020) arrives at a similar conclusion in his analysis of the metamorphosis of the Catholic church in Goa after 1961, stressing additionally how the Church, through its many activities, has also sought collaboration with Goa's Hindu majority. To Abreu (2020, 35), this has created two new images of the Church in Goa today: a more radical Church that is socially active and ready to tackle the roots rather than the effects of social injustice; but also a church that promotes inter-religious dialogue and seeks to build Hindu-Christian solidarity around the fight against social injustice. Abreu (2020, 36–37) further suggests that these efforts to promote and strengthen Hindu-Christian solidarity can be understood as "at some level a struggle for survival and for remaining relevant" in a context where the Church no longer enjoys colonial state patronage and where the number of Goan Christians has declined to around 25 percent of the Goan population. In this regard, the Church has enjoyed some success insofar as its involvement in social and political issues and its collaboration with different secular NGOs has enabled it to continue to assert sociopolitical influence in the public sphere in the postcolonial context.

As the discussion above has shown, environmental struggles, or struggles with environmental components, have been on the Church's agenda in Goa for many years, but so have a whole range of other social and political issues. It is, in fact, only during the last decade or two that environmentalism has risen to particular

prominence within the Church's broader portfolio of social engagement. This has, however, occurred alongside the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism—both in Goa and India at large—as a political force that actively seeks to circumscribe and limit the capacity of religious minority institutions to engage in crucial public debates. The next section analyzes the relationship between the consolidation of Hindu nationalism and the Church's increasingly visible engagement in local environmental issues.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Its Consequences

For the past decade, Hindu nationalism has consolidated as the hegemonic political force across much of India (Vanaik 2018; Jaffrelot 2021; Hansen and Roy 2022). The current national government is led by the BJP, supported by the wider Hindu nationalist movement, and led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is widely conceived as an authoritarian or national populist (Jakobsen and Nielsen 2024; Sinha 2021; Nielsen and Nilsen 2022; Jaffrelot 2021; 2024).

Hindu nationalism in its contemporary avatar represents a form of conservative politics that works according to a series of antagonistic contradictions. One such contradiction that is integral to populism at large is established between common people and elites, casting the latter as the enemy of the former. Another contradiction is drawn between "true Indians" and their "anti-national" enemies, according to which the latter can be subjected to coercion, ostensibly in order to protect the former. In line with the core tenets of Hindu nationalism as a cultural and political project, the line separating "true Indians" from their enemies is defined in large part by religion, with Hindu nationalist ideology and politics casting Indian Muslims as "the epitome of the other" (Jaffrelot 2021, 194) in order to frame a unitary conception of the Hindu nation. Yet in some contexts, it is Indian Christians who occupy the position as "the antagonistic other." Indeed, Hindu nationalism has a long history of conceiving of Christians as "cultural invaders" who through proselytization work to undermine the Hindu nation from within; or who work as agents of Western cultural imperialism seeking to lure unsuspecting Indians away from their "natural Hindu way of life." As summarized by Bauman (2014), Hindu nationalists denounce evangelical proselytization as a socially disruptive endeavor that is driven by deceit and allurement, and which leads to the "denationalization" of Indians who convert to Christianity. In line with such thinking, Indian Christians have currently become "prime targets" (Jaffrelot 2021, 189–93) of the Hindu nationalist regime, making the public display of Christian sentiments or practices a potentially dangerous affair. BJP governments in many Indian states have actively sought to circumscribe and undermine the freedom and operational

capacity of Christian schools and NGOs through a variety of legal means, with for example missionary proselytization (or any other activity that can be construed as such) being increasingly criminalized (Nielsen, Selvaraj and Nilsen 2023). Such laws have, in turn, enabled an increase in physical abuse and extra-legal violence against Christian communities, and the vandalization of Churches or places of worship, perpetrated by vigilante Hindu nationalist groups. Although such groups formally operate independently of government, they can act with considerable impunity and often present themselves as righteous defenders of the law of the land against so-called "anti-national" and subversive Christian communities whose loyalties are believed to lie elsewhere.

While Hindu nationalism made a late entry into Goa, it has consolidated here as well over the past decade and a half, with the BJP having been in power uninterruptedly since 2012. In its early years, the BJP in Goa represented a softer form of Hindu nationalism that stressed development and good governance over religion, downplayed communal polarization, and even succeeded in attracting a considerable number of Christian politicians and voters. While the issue of Hindu supremacy and religious polarization was never entirely absent, analysts of Goan politics could as recently as a decade ago reasonably claim that "the Catholics in Goa do not see the BJP as a threat" and that "even the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh cadres are not seen as being hardliners like their counterparts in other states in India" (D'Mello 2018, 226–27). Yet over the last few years, Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Goa has hardened (Nielsen, Gokhale and Shringare 2025), with a more audible rhetorical targeting of the state's Christian minority, coupled with demands that the legacies of Portuguese colonialism (which can be said to include Catholicism) should be "wiped away" and that greater efforts need to be made to restore and promote Goa's "original Hindu culture" (Nielsen, Bhattacharya and Da Silva 2023; Nielsen 2025). This agenda is also pursued by hardline Hindu nationalist groups such as the Sanathan Sanstha whose members engage in self-defense training including the use of firearms, and who have been linked to a series of violent actions in several states (Jaffrelot 2021, 243–47; Jha 2017, 11–32).

While physical assaults on Goan Christians have been few and far between, there is now an increasing policing by Hindu nationalist groups of what representatives of the Church say and do in public. As recent examples show, isolated lines from a sermon in Church can easily be picked up by Hindu nationalist groups, taken out of context and framed as anti-Hindu or anti-national propaganda, and the priest taken to court; civic opposition to the illegal installment of Hindu statues or imagery in public spaces by Hindu nationalist organizations can in a comparable manner be construed as blasphemous or as intentionally provoking the sentiments of Hindus if "a Christian hand" can somehow be identified in such opposition; priests who take a guiding role in explaining the policies and ideologies of political parties before

elections can similarly expect to be roundly condemned by Hindu nationalist organizations for interfering in or communalizing the elections; and so forth (Nielsen 2025). Indeed, most respondents interviewed for this chapter said that it had now become harder for the Church to make public commentary on the pressing social or political issues of the day. Every respondent within and outside the Church that we interviewed agreed that its voice had been missing from important debates on the challenges facing Goa today, including environmental challenges, as we elaborate on below. Respondents pointed out that while individual priests have sometimes been associated with recent popular movements centered on these issues and have attended public meetings, there has been little or no communication from the Church as an institution, neither from the archbishop nor from its organs like the Council for Social Justice and Peace, whose office in Panaji one person described as a "deserted place" in contrast to a "24/7 war room for activists" from a decade ago.

This hesitancy on the part of the Church is closely related to the rise of Hindu nationalism. "Anything we say, they give it a communal color," was a common refrain among priests, "they" referring to the BJP government and allied Hindu nationalist organizations who are quick to construe the Church as being anti-Hindu and fomenting communal hatred. As the political analyst and commentator Cleofato Almeida Coutinho put it, "even if the church may do much good social work, or raise its voice against human rights violations, the moment the clergy's involvement becomes public, the BJP or RSS will turn it into a religious issue" (Suresh and Saeeduzzaman 2022). Some priests reported receiving threats from unknown callers demanding they cancel protest meetings or public events, while others have received advice from the police or government officials to cancel certain events or face legal action. One priest, who has taken up social issues for over two decades, referred to instances from earlier when Church actors could negotiate and discuss issues with senior government officials and ministers. But this dialogue seems to have ended as the current BJP government appears openly hostile to the Church.

A related explanation for the hesitancy of the Church is of a more material sort as the Church fears losing access to state government grants for its schools, old age homes, orphanages, and the cancellation of its license from the central government to receive funds from abroad. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act has been actively used by the central government to arm-twist and punish organizations critical of its policies, including NGOs, prominent think tanks and environmentalist organizations, and even some organs of the Church in other states (*The Wire* 2024). In all, more than 20,000 NGOs have lost their license to receive foreign funding since 2015 (Jaffrelot 2021, 183–85), effectively rendering them financially incapable of functioning. The church in Goa, thus, appears to have arrived at the conclusion that taking public positions on controversial issues may well cause greater damage by endangering its charity and educational work, as well as its own parish

activities. Some respondents from the church, however, insisted that the Church in fact remains active, only in a more discreet and non-public manner, informing the laity locally about social and environmental issues and asking them to show up at protests. Individual priests too take up public causes but are careful not to speak on behalf of the Church. As one priest said: "People ask why the archbishop is not saying anything. But if he makes a statement, all our schools, our institutions are getting targeted. So what is better? That we do [our work] through the people, or make statements and then everybody suffers?"

This scenario characterized by increased policing of the activities of the church in both civil and political society evidently limits the capacity of the Church for publicly sustaining its involvement in social and political issues that are of importance to Goans, and, by extension, its capacity for asserting sociopolitical influence. It is in this context that environmentalism and the engagement in environmental issues has emerged as an important field of public intervention by the Church. This is not to say that the Church's engagement in environmental issues is entirely new. Environmental questions have, as indicated above, long been part of the Church's agenda, and one of the first initiatives taken up by the Diocesan Service Centre for Social Action was, in fact, an investigation into the possible environmental impact of the construction of a five-star hotel on Goa's coastline. Similarly, already in 2002, the Diocesan Synod organized by the Church in Goa acknowledged that one of the great crises of the times was the ecological imbalance caused by the exploitation and misuse of natural resources, including "environmental concerns" in its list of six "challenges for the Church in Goa in the exercise of her mission." However, all respondents interviewed agreed that the emphasis on environmental issues within the Church is arguably more pronounced today than two decades ago. This development has been driven both from above and from below. It has been greatly influenced by the publication of the *Laudato Si'* in 2015, which led to the setting up of the Diocesan Commission on Ecology in Goa in 2022, the first of its kind in India. This commission is expected to perform all environmental activities of the Church and implement the teachings in *Laudato Si'*. This is a significant development insofar as the Church's environmental work was earlier a part of its broader social outreach under institutions such as the Council for Social Justice and Peace and its affiliate Centre for Responsible Tourism. The new Diocesan Commission on Ecology consists of members from the Church and the laity, including schoolteachers and students. Among its initial activities are planting mangroves, working with youth farmer clubs, and engaging with schoolchildren. Notably, as a respondent put it, the commission's focus is now "directly" on ecology in its own right, and "not through social justice."

From below, the protection or restoration of Goa's environment, its wildlife, water bodies, rivers, air, and soil are issues that, for very good reasons, engage and concern a very large number of Goans not just among the Catholic laity, but

irrespective of creed and confession. To put it bluntly, the situation in Goa is such that the state would, even without climate change, be approaching an environmental disaster with considerable speed. A large and for long mostly unregulated mining industry extracting enormous amounts of minerals in the hinterlands for global exports has caused tremendous damage to forests, land, and waterbodies in Goa's interior, the consequences of which are felt far beyond the so-called "mining affected areas" (de Souza 2015). Elsewhere in the state, the development of industrial parks and infrastructure—airports, roads, and railways—has dramatically transformed the environment through expansive concretization and the destruction of biodiversity hotspots and agricultural land, and polluting and water-guzzling industrial activities. Goa's status as a holiday destination (Routledge 2001) and favored location for a "second home" for well-off Indians (Sampat 2014), combined with the influx of speculative capital, have led to an explosion in the construction of resorts, hotels, and real estate almost across the state, with all the associated problems of waste management, vehicular traffic pollution, sand dune erosion along the coast, the cutting of forests and hills, and considerable strain on local resources. Much of this has happened within the span of only a few decades, and for many Goans it has felt as if their familiar green environment has collapsed in real time in front of their eyes; or at the very least that it has been fundamentally altered for the worse, making Goa much less livable. When he talks about clean air, clean water, and the protection of hills, forests, fields and rivers, the archbishop therefore effectively taps into widely shared environmental concerns and anxieties among many Goans.

The Church's turn toward environmentalism arguably constitutes a more readily acceptable form of social outreach and activism than championing human rights, or openly telling people who they should and should not vote for. It can more easily be construed, also among Hindu nationalists, as an apolitical and secular activity, at least insofar as it remains focused on ameliorating localized and concrete environmental problems that adversely affect all Goans. One example of such moderately ameliorative environmental interventions can be found in the circulars of the Council of Social Justice and Peace that encourage Church leaders to work collectively to provide environmental awareness to parishioners and to effect piecemeal changes toward "greener" everyday practices among priests and parishioners alike by, for example, encouraging the use of eco-friendly materials, avoiding single-use plastics at church meetings and seminars, and so on.

But importantly, the scope for Christian environmentalism is certainly not without limits. Of crucial importance in terms of defining these limits is the fact that BJP governments both nationally and in Goa—in addition to being hostile toward Christianity as such—remain firmly committed to a neoliberal restructuring of the economy at the expense of the environment. As Dutta and Nielsen (2022) have argued, this neoliberal restructuring is enabled by, among other things, the dilution

of environmental legislation and safeguards, the speeding up of clearances for environmentally damaging projects in infrastructure and industry, and a narrowing of the space for popular participation and civil society engagement in environmental issues. There has, not least, under BJP rule been a marked increase in the policing of environmental groups and activists across India, many of whom have been branded as "anti-national" and shamed for sabotaging India's economic growth because of their opposition to environmentally damaging large-scale projects. For example, the Indian chapter of Fridays for Future has had its website blocked by the authorities and was served legal notice from the police under the country's draconian anti-terror law. Overall, India made the list of "deadliest countries for environmental activists" according to a Global Witness (2017) report that claimed that killing of environmental activists had increased threefold from 2015 to 2016 "against a backdrop of heavy-handed policing and the repression of peaceful protests and civic activism" (Global Witness 2017, 6). In Goa too, strong political and business interests that in practice often overlap are heavily invested in those economic sectors that cause the most damage to Goa's environment, such as real estate, mining, and land conversions. To the extent that environmental activism runs counter to these interests or threatens to derail capitalist accumulation in key economic sectors, severe repercussions are to be expected, something to which most Goan environmentalists can testify.

The current conjuncture, then, may be conducive to and render some forms of Christian environmentalism legitimate, while repressing and criminalizing other forms as "environmental terrorism" or "anti-national activities." Among the many possible forms that a contemporary Christian environmentalism could take in Goa, we suggest that these contextual factors play an important role in rendering agroecology and agricultural interventions a socially and politically acceptable and even attractive form of Christian environmentalism. Our aim in the following is to offer illustrations of the forms that these agricultural interventions may take, but also to offer a series of reflections on the significance of Church institutions, networks, and forms of knowledge as they operate within and across these interventions.

The Church, Agroecology and Community Farming

The involvement of the Church in agriculture in Goa is not entirely new. Fr. Inacio Almeida, for example, who worked with organic farming from the early 1990s is considered an early pioneer in the field, organizing camps for farmers, taking farming-based education to the schools, and working to engage the youth. A state agriculture award is now named after him (Braganza 2022; Navhind Times 2014). Currently, however, priests engaged in agriculture can no longer considered lone pioneers, but are rather a part of a broader movement within the Church toward

agriculture. In fact, the revival of agriculture has emerged as a major environmental initiative for the Church within the last decade, including on the Church's own lands and in its seminaries. As one priest explained:

> In the reflections following *Laudato Si'*, very consciously our church in Goa has moved a lot into getting people into farming and horticulture. Much of our own land was just lying fallow and a lot of new farms have come up. We have also named one of the farms *Laudato Si'*. The reflection is that it is not construction which will remain forever, it is farming. Seminaries are involved in cultivating agriculture and horticulture. So we want to plant that seed in the minds of the ones who are preparing for priesthood also.

At its seminary in Saligao, the Church has established an organic farming and composting initiative called "GOA with EARTH," an acronym for Guaranteed Organized Action with Efficiently Applying Residue Treating Habits. Under this project, an outlet at the seminary allows visitors to purchase saplings, donate organic waste for composting, learn about composting and hydroponic cultivation methods, and even hang out or work in an airconditioned coworking space and cafe retrofitted inside an out-of-service bus. The project also conducts training for school students. Several Catholic schools practice gardening, involving students in the production of organic fruits and vegetables, and organizing them into "eco clubs" to encourage them to "go green" (Herald 2022).

Elsewhere in Goa, the Salesians, who we shall return to in more detail later, have played a no less important role, running an agricultural college in south Goa from 2015, offering agricultural education and training to the youth and developing new agricultural technologies. Other priests run their own organic farms, experimenting with different plant varieties and techniques such as vermi-compost and natural pesticides (Herald 2022). Yet others have spearheaded small-scale so-called "farmers' clubs," organizing rural communities to take up organic farming on long-abandoned patches of erstwhile farmland—a pressing issue in Goa where large areas of arable lands have fallen out of cultivation. One such project has emerged in the village of Chicalim where the charismatic parish priest Fr. Bolmax has been instrumental in mobilizing the local youth to take up farming. Fr. Bolmax holds a master's degree in ecology and environment and a doctorate in botany, personally embodying a not uncommon fusion of science and faith within Christian environmentalism and agroecology. He has also been involved in a local Biocrusaders Group in his parish and has been selected as an "eco achiever" by the Prithvi Parivar pan-India Ecological Movement, launched recently by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India Commission for Ecology (*The Goan* 2021). This movement is, in turn, inspired by the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform and Pope Francis' arguments on integral ecology as the solution to the environmental crisis (*Times of India* 2021).

In what follows, we zoom in on another such farmers' club, namely that in St. Estevam, where a group of villagers have come together to initiate community-based agriculture, relying on organic farming without pesticides and chemicals. There are several similar clubs across Goa, all of which promote forms of organic agriculture that are rooted in local communities to produce food that is not damaging to human health and local environments. Some also work to revive and protect Goa's unique *khazan* ecosystem, comprised by lands reclaimed from the sea over centuries through an intricate system of bunds, sluice gates, and artificial lakes and channels that regulate the flow of water during tides. Traditionally managed by the village community, the *khazans* are primarily used for an ecologically balanced and environmentally sustainable mix of saline-tolerant paddy cultivation combined with small-scale fishing (Rubinoff 2001, 1110). Much of this ecosystem system has, however, crumbled due to a lack of maintenance, and many *khazans* are currently inundated with salt water and unfit for cultivation. Instead, some *khazan* lands have been diverted to unsustainable large-scale commercial fish or shrimp cultivation, while others have become favorite targets for real estate developers. Some farmers' clubs work to rejuvenate this unique ecosystem by reclaiming the *khazans* for agricultural purposes and are joined in this effort by other environmentalist groups seeking UNESCO World Heritage Site status for Goa's *khazans* (Kamat 2021).

In addition to its illustrative value, the case of the St. Estevam farmers' club is of interest for two additional reasons. First because, unlike the many brief examples discussed above in which Church institutions or the clergy played *visible* and *leading* roles, the Church has played more of a *discreet, supporting* and *enabling* role in St. Estevam, where the main initiative rather came from and was spearheaded by a local agropreneur. This somewhat discreet involvement of the Church illustrates its potentially productive intertwinement with agroecological initiatives with secular beginnings and origins beyond the Church. Second, it also allows us to move beyond often-discussed theological or ideational aspects of Christian environmentalism to show empirically how the institutional and organizational scaffolding of the Church, the qualities and capabilities of its personnel, and the networks of knowledge, resources, and expertise that Church actors can tap into and mobilize into action, play important roles in the making of agroecological initiatives.

The St. Estevam Farmers' Club and the Discreet Role of the Church

The St. Estevam farmers' club was launched in 2018 on the islet of St. Estevam, named after the Christian Protomartyr St. Stephen, to whom the local Catholic Church is also dedicated. Indeed, Catholicism has a long presence in St. Estevam going back nearly half a millennium: The Jesuits arrived in the 1550s, the first

conversion to Catholicism happened in 1555, and the first local Church was built in 1575. The more recent history of the islet is also testimony to the increasing intertwinement between Catholicism and environmentalism, embodied in one of Goa's most well-known environmentalists, the late priest-turned-activist Fr. Bismarque Dias who was born in St. Estevam and who was actively engaged in a series of popular movements—some of which even targeted the Church in Goa—until he was found dead under suspicious circumstances in 2015 (Dev 2015).[3]

St. Estevam remains overwhelmingly Catholic today. As the anthropologist Alexander Henn (2014, 83–125) has observed, each Goan village constitutes "a world of its own," its territory structured in wards, fields, and wilderness, marked by recognized boundaries that are guarded by tutelary beings, and affirmed by rituals and processions. Popular Catholic religiosity, Henn argues, is generally guided by a "localistic principle" that closely associates specific patron saints—in this case St. Stephen—with the territories and localities of the village. These patron saints are, in Catholic villages, considered founders, members and guardians of the village community, protecting its territory and people, in effect embodying rather than merely representing the village. To this day, the saints, symbols, and institutions of Catholicism play significant roles in the social and spatial organization and identity of the village community, and the temporal rhythms of village life.

As indicated, the driving force behind the farmers' club was, however, not of the clergy; nor was the idea of the farmers' club in any way justified through religious doctrine or duty, personal faith, or an ethics of care derived from Christian teachings. The club, rather, appeared secular in all respects. The initiative came from Mr. da Silva, a former engineer turned agropreneur and vermiculturist who, after having been based elsewhere in India for many years, returned to Goa to become a farmer. Mr. da Silva succeeded in mobilizing a number of St. Estevam residents, many of whom had over the past few years become increasingly apprehensive about the fate of the village because of widespread rumors that land sharks and real estate developers were looking to buy up the village agricultural lands, much of which had been fallow for many years. In this respect, the farmers' club's mission of bringing village lands under the plough again rendered it as much a land defense movement as an agroecological initiative.

One of the first things Mr. da Silva and his small core team did was to reach out to the local parish priest to "sell the idea to him" (do Rosario 2018). Having won the support of the priest, the first challenge that confronted the nascent farmers' club was to identify the village's agricultural land and its owners. This would prove to be a laborious undertaking. Agriculture had largely been abandoned in St. Estevam for nearly three decades as people had turned to other professions or worked abroad, leaving the fields fallow, overgrown, and hard to identify. With interest in agriculture having thus dwindled dramatically over many decades, people were

generally unable to recollect the extent, and sometimes even the location of their farmland. While many could still recount childhood memories of their grandparents toiling in their fields many years ago, few remembered the location of these fields, much less where the boundaries between them had run. As one farm club member explained: "Most of the homes didn't even know their fields. These were the third generation out of agriculture."

In light of this, local volunteers took up the task of surveying the *khazan* lands that the farmers' club hoped to cultivate—an area covering one million square meters. To aid the process, a large and detailed map of the entire village and its surroundings was obtained from the local Church—possibly the only institution possessing such a map—while supplementary land records were downloaded from various online sources. The parish priest of St. Estevam Church actively joined the effort, assisting the process of identifying village agricultural lands and settling issues of land ownership by converting his morning sermons into appeals during which he would ask worshippers to search for documents and land records, and to use their wider family and kinship networks to locate possible heirs who might possess knowledge about land deeds and entitlements. The parish priest also made weekly announcements during mass about the farmers' club initiative, explaining its rationale, the requirements involved, and encouraging people to unite and practice community farming.

Based on the collected information, booklets were eventually produced for each *khazan* and taken to the local *somudais*—a small ecclesial unit organized at the ward or intra-ward level, akin to a "basic Christian community"—who assisted in identifying and eventually locating most of the landholdings along with their owners, enquired about people's interest in participating in the project, and conducted a series of village meetings to bring people on board.

The next challenge that confronted the farmers' club was the issue of economic feasibility. Their estimates showed that farming one acre of land would cost in the region of INR 45,000 toward the required materials and labor time needed for ploughing, harvesting and de-weeding that had to be done manually. This was a relatively high sum, given the uncertainties of the outcome, and the farmers' club's plans were initially met with some local skepticism. As one of the early initiative-takers explained: "people didn't trust us and were worried if this was another attempt to take land." The issue of labor assumed particular urgency since, as one farm club member put it, "the members of the village couldn't till the land"—for the simple reason that they had never done it. And the cost of agricultural labor in Goa is prohibitively high when compared to the great risks and slim and highly uncertain profits that define agricultural production in India (Münster 2015; Matthan 2022).

Solutions to the problem of labor were provided by the Catholic Church. Locally, the parish priest appealed to the strong, energetic youth of the village to come out

and participate in the preparation and the planting. The priest also personally went to the paddy fields to participate in the work and, by thus being "the first man in the field," as one local put it, made it difficult for the younger boys to opt out, lest they disrespect the priest. But more importantly, it was Fr. George Quadros from South Goa who provided a more effective solution to the challenges posed by the question of labor. Fr. Quadros belonged to the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, a congregation more commonly known as the Salesians. The Salesians generally have a strong emphasis on the virtues of education and work, upholding "daily work as prayer" and stressing an educational style that, in their words, is based on "reason, religion, and loving-kindness."

Fr. Quadros worked with the Salesians' Agriculture Training and Research Centre, a center that offers a degree in agricultural sciences and runs the Don Bosco Farm High School. Describing himself as an amateur farmer by heart, Fr. Quadros had experimented with various cultivation methods since the mid-1980s and had come to see his attraction to farming as a calling because "wherever I put my hands, there was considerable success" (*Herald* 2022). Fr. Quadros had come to realize that although mechanized farming both reduced costs and boosted yields, the cost of the machinery was too high for smallholders. However, after witnessing an exhibition by a Japanese company called Kubota who had developed innovative technology that would mechanize paddy farming in cost-effective ways, he had persuaded the government of Goa to invest in a pilot project to bring this technology to Goa. A successful trial in 2015 using the Japanese-made technology on 3,000 square meters of Goan paddy fields—followed by in situ demonstrations of his technology in many parts of the state—earned Fr. Quadros a reputation as a local pioneer in the field of mechanized rice farming as well as the moniker "The Paddy Man of Goa" (*Navhind Times* 2023). This meant that prior to the launch of the farmers' club, his experimental work with mechanized farming for both seed germination, transplantation, and harvesting was already known to some villagers of St. Estevam.

The mechanized rice farming that Fr. Quadros promotes is very different from the traditional methods where plough, rake, and hatchet are used. Ploughing and preparation is carried out by tractor and rotovators, and the planting done using ready-made trays that pass through a machine with a conveyor belt, which fills different layers of mud, seeds, and water. Transplanting is later done mechanically. These technological innovations significantly reduce the time required to plant, as well as the overall demand for agricultural labor.

Through the application of Fr. Quadros' technologies, the farmer's club managed to pool and cultivate 450,000 square meters of erstwhile fallow rice fields in its first season in 2018, bringing together several hundred local families in the farm club venture. The first harvest produced a bumper crop of rice, and the large

Church square in front of the St. Estevam Church was enlisted as the designated site for drying the rice. In 2019, the farmers' club planned to scale up production to grow rice on one million square meters of land, only to see severe floods destroy much of the crop. But despite this, the St. Estevam farmers' club has been upheld as a model for emulation elsewhere in the state, and its style of community farming enjoys widespread political support. The BJP's chief minister is a strong proponent of the model, and publicly encourages the youth of the state to return to primary sector occupations, supported by significant state subsidies (D'Mello 2019). These include an "assistance for community farming" scheme—put in place in Goa in 2018—through which the government encourages community farming as a strategy for ensuring a greener Goa and a reduction in the number of fields kept fallow. The scheme offers a long list of subsidies—of up to 90 percent in cases where more than ten farmers pool their land—for infrastructure and input, and guaranteed prices for output. The scheme came into effect in 2020–2021, with the number of groups availing of the scheme increasing rapidly, from just four in the first year, to fifty-seven a few years later (Hegde 2023).

Conclusion

We began this chapter by making a twofold assertion, namely that (1) the Church in Goa has made environmentalism an increasingly important part of its social outreach and engagement over the past decade or two; and that (2) this development needs to be situated and understood within a wider political context marked by the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism as a hegemonic force. In this regard, the St. Estevam farmers' club is illustrative of one modality of Church engagement in a specific form of environmentalism whose historical emergence we have traced in this chapter, namely that associated with agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation. The overall shift toward environmental questions and agriculture on the part of the Church has of course, as we have sought to show, been the outcome of longer and complex historical processes, propelled by a combination of factors pertaining to overall reorientations and transformations within the Catholic Church post-Vatican II, to the changes to its social and political role in Goa after 1961, and to the locally unfolding environmental disaster in Goa that has accelerated in sync with a rising global awareness about environmentalism and climate change. But we have emphasized that in the specific Goan context, the current articulation of Christian environmentalism through agroecology has been profoundly shaped by the wider Hindu majoritarian political context that has, on the one hand, shrunk the space available for public outreach and social engagement on the part of the Church, while simultaneously rendering legitimate *some* forms of organizing

around ostensibly "apolitical" and local environmental issues such as community agriculture.

It is in this context that the farmers' club's illumination of a specific and more discreet manifestation of Christian environmentalism—in which the Church does not lead, but rather takes up a supporting and enabling role by making available its institutions, personnel, and extensive networks to initiatives originating elsewhere—merits further attention. Indeed, the institutional role of the Church shines through in several ways: at the level of the village, for example, the local Church functions as an institutional archive of historical knowledge on local land use and relations; as an organizational network linking St. Estevam to wider, more dispersed locations of agricultural and technological expertise; as a crucial node in the flow of communication about the activities of the farmers' club involving sermons, masses and *somudais*; as a locus of legitimate authority enabling the clergy—by example as much as by virtue of office—to mobilize a community, its resources, and labor; and as a physical space where the harvest could be stored and dried. These institutional and organizational factors were arguably important to the making of successful community collaboration around agroecology and agricultural rejuvenation—even if the driving force was not from among the clergy. Yet at the same time, the farmers' club was decidedly secular in most respects. For Mr. da Silva, the driving force in the initiative, the key motivation was to use the rejuvenation of local agriculture as a strategy for stopping the unregulated land grabbing that was destroying the village and the region of Goa that he held dear. Moreover, his approach to agriculture was firmly rooted in science, and he was dismissive of more "spiritual" or new age agricultural initiatives that also flourish in India—such as yogic ecology and zero budget natural farming that Münster analyses elsewhere in this volume—which he saw as nativist, unscientific, and unfeasible humbuggery. The innovative champion of mechanized farming, Fr. Quadros, did recognize his agricultural work as a calling and as the equivalent to daily prayer; but he too chose to stress the mutuality of science and religion (integral to Catholic teaching) by emphasizing hard work, commitment, technology, and the minimum natural requirements as the key to agricultural success—supplemented by prayer, but not vice versa. Such discreet and institutionally anchored Church support for forms of local agroecology that enjoy widespread state support also from Hindu nationalist governments arguably serve to legitimize the active and socially engaged role of the Church in Goan society, despite the largely hostile political context.

In other words, by openly spearheading and institutionalizing some agroecological initiatives, and by more discreetly extending its organizational and institutional support to others, the Church in Goa is treading a fine balance as it demonstrates its commitment to a specific part of the green agenda, namely localized agroecology, that enjoys widespread social and even political legitimacy. In

doing so, it simultaneously fortifies its role in the life of village communities and its standing as an influential social institution in the wider Goan society, reaffirming—in a discreet, secular, and politically acceptable way—that the Church can and should have a public voice and play a leading role in debating and addressing issues of concern to Goans. However, its ability to do so in ways that can avoid attacks from the Hindu right that the Church's public outreach is a mere mask for fraudulently undermining the Hindu nation will for the foreseeable future hinge on the discreetness of its approach, and on the continued existence of more widespread sentiments that community agriculture is "apolitical."

Notes

1 The chapter is based on a series of interviews with environmentalists in Goa both inside and outside the Church, conducted by Gokhale in early 2024. The narrative case study of the St. Estevam farmers' club is based on a visit to the village by Nielsen in 2020; on conversations with people involved in the initiative; and on a synthesis of information and descriptions from a number of written sources in the public domain, including D'Mello 2019; Silveira n.d. and George 2019. Gokhale lived and worked as a journalist in Goa for some years prior to COVID-19, while Nielsen has carried out research on the politics of land use and dispossession in Goa for around a decade. These experiences have informed our contextualization of the present study.

2 It also tends to make the Catholic Church's environmental engagements in Goa somewhat contradictory insofar as the Church can be said to have been involved in creating some of the problems it now claims to be solving. It has, for example, sold coastal agricultural land in its possession to resort companies and chemical industries; at other times it has sought to have Church lands converted or "re-zoned" from "natural cover" to "settlement" in order to develop it for housing or residential purposes for a profit. While these contradictions merit further exploration, our focus in this chapter remains on the issue of environmentalism and agroecology.

3 Fr. Bismarque was defrocked in 2011 for his criticism of the Church's own land dealings with resort developers.

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CHAPTER 8

The Purest Food: Cowmilk, Transcendent Claims, and Ecological Sustainability in India

Amita Baviskar

Abstract

Milk from indigenous cows has emerged as a fast-rising food movement among urban Indian elites who praise the milk as better for nutrition, animal welfare, and ecological sustainability.[1] Claims about this milk also appeal to the Hindu idea of the sacred cow and to nationalist discourses about the purity and authenticity of indigenous products. This chapter examines practices around indigenous cowmilk to analyze how religion and ethics inform the creation of a more ecologically benign milk economy. It shows how beliefs about the sacred cow, compassion for living beings, and care of the earth confront capitalism and its instrumentalization of nature for profit. The consequent compromises illuminate the limits of this and other elite movements for alternatives to industrial agriculture.

Keywords: Industrial agriculture, milk, sacred cow, indigeneity, Hinduism, capitalism

Introduction

Milk from indigenous breeds of cows has emerged as a fast-rising food movement among elite urban consumers in India. Producers and consumers praise the milk as better for nutrition and food safety, animal welfare, and ecological sustainability. Claims about the superiority of this milk also appeal to the Hindu idea of the sacred cow and to a nationalist discourse about the purity and authenticity of indigenous products. This chapter examines the material and discursive practices around *desi* (indigenous) cowmilk to understand how religion and ethics inform attempts to create a more ecologically benign milk economy. It shows that actors' transcendental beliefs about the sacred cow, compassion for living beings, and care of the earth confront the pervasive power of capitalism and its instrumentalization of nature for profit. The compromises they make illuminate the limits of this and other elite movements for alternatives to industrial agriculture (Frazier 2018). They also provoke us to probe beyond the "solutions" that lie within easy reach to the more difficult task of embedding ecological ethics into the everyday life of capitalism (Guthman 2014).

I begin by explaining the cultural significance of cows for Hindus, especially upper castes, for whom the cow is sacred and cowmilk products have the power to purify. This deification contrasts with the profane status of another common indigenous milch animal: the buffalo. In tracing the divergent careers of cows and buffaloes—and their milk—in the dairy economy, I discuss how the rise of Hindu nationalism since the 1990s and the consequent government ban on cow slaughter has disrupted the economic viability of small-scale cow rearing as part of an inter-caste, inter-religious rural economy. After discussing the changing cultural politics of the sacred cow, I turn to the political economy of Operation Flood, the government program since the 1970s to increase milk supply to urban consumers by using crossbred cows, intensive feeding, and industrial processing in a national production grid. I show how this program led to cowmilk production outstripping buffalo milk so that, in 2014, cowmilk emerged as a new and distinct form of mass-marketed, packaged milk.

Cultural politics and political economy provide the context for the subject of this chapter: the newly developed market for milk from *indigenous* breeds of cow. We interviewed dairy owners, workers, and consumers in and around Delhi to understand the ethical choices they make in an environment where one's relationship with food has become fraught.[2] We found that desi dairy owners persuasively promote a syncretic philosophy that weaves together religious, ecological, and biomedical claims but, to run a profitable business, they ultimately conform to the agro-industrial logic that they criticize and aim to counter. Our conversations with consumers showed that a surfeit of conflicting information had left people confused about food and health, and long-distance industrial food chains had made them suspicious about the quality of what they ate and drank. Those who wanted to do the right thing, and could afford to do so, turned to that superfood: organic desi cowmilk.

I conclude by asking whether the turn toward organic, indigenous cowmilk could usher in a wider transformation by nudging industrial dairying toward greater ecological sustainability and an ethics of care for other living beings. I argue that, while they used organic inputs, desi cow dairies remained milk monocultures unintegrated into local ecological loops. In addition, their high-end boutique business model could not be adopted by the vast majority of farmers who supplied the national milk grid. Finally, rearing animals exclusively for their milk meant that they had to be killed when they stopped lactating. It is only by concealing the violence inherent in dairying as a capitalist enterprise that the idea of the sacred cow can continue to be cultivated. This contradiction highlights that elite consumer action is not by itself a coherent strategy for remaking ecological relations. Yet the questions that it raises about health and welfare—human, animal, and planetary—reflect the concerns of a wider constituency. To become a truly transformative movement, it will have to transcend class differences and make common cause with consumer rights groups, animal activists, and farmers' organizations.

Cows and Buffaloes: The Place of Milk in Diets, Livelihoods, and Religion

Milk and milk products have been a part of diets on the Indian subcontinent for millennia (Achaya 1998). Butter, ghee (clarified butter), yogurt, paneer, milk-based sweets, as well as milk by itself, figure centrally in popular ideas of what is "good to eat." The aroma of cumin seeds sizzling in hot ghee is one of the signature scents of subcontinental cuisine. While most Indians eat eggs, fish, and meat, many cannot afford to eat these regularly. Although there are significant differences between regions, classes, religions, and castes (Natrajan and Jacob 2018), milk products and pulses are the chief sources of protein in most Indian diets. Indians who are lacto-vegetarians, around 30 percent of the population (ibid.), tend to belong to Hindu high castes such as Brahmin and Baniya. Their higher status endows vegetarianism with a superior cultural value.[3] Within a caste-based alimentary code, milk is supreme.

Rearing milch cattle—cows and buffaloes—has been integral to mixed agropastoral livelihoods as well as specialized dairying by specific castes such as the Yadav, Ahir, and Gujjar in north India. Milk is always described as "good for you"—not only as an essential source of nutrients that modern science identifies as protein, calcium, fats, and vitamins, but also for being "wholesome" and "pure." Hindus believe that milk products such as ghee ritually purify other foods, transforming the raw/profane (*kachcha*) into cooked/sacred (*pakka*). During rituals, Hindu priests pour ghee into the sacred fire as an offering to Agni, the fire god. Among the most widely practiced forms of Hinduism are various Vaishnav cults that celebrate Krishna, the cowherd god who frolicked in the forests of Braj, playing the flute and flirting with adoring cowgirls (fig.1). Central to this cosmology is the Indian cow: Zebu (*Bos indicus*). In Hindu mythology, the churning of the cosmic ocean is believed to have yielded Kamadhenu, the sacred cow who can fulfill all desires. The cow is mother (*gau-mata*). She epitomizes the ideal of selfless giving and nurturing. Feeding cows and looking after them are acts of pious charity for Hindus.

Notably, no such beliefs surround the buffalo, even though buffalo milk is widely consumed and valued for its creamy whiteness, its higher proportion of fats and non-fat solids giving it a satisfying richness. For dairy farmers, buffaloes are more profitable animals since they yield 4.1 to 6.4 kg of milk per day on average, which is much more than the 2.7 to 3.3 kg per day from desi cows (Rampal 2022). Buffaloes also lactate for longer periods and the higher costs of their upkeep are recovered by the higher prices obtained by the overall larger and fattier milk yield. As "the backbone of India's milk supply" (ibid.), buffaloes are respected and cherished as "economic animals," but they are not revered (Hardy 2019). That sentiment is reserved for the cow.

The opposition between the white cow and the black buffalo is tinged with casteist and racist connotations (Ilaiah 2004). The Sanskrit word for caste—*varna*—also

Figure 8.1: Krishna playing the flute with *gopis*, ca. 1790–1800, Guler/Kangra region.
Source: Free Gallery of Art/Wikimedia Commons

refers to skin color. All over India, fair skin is synonymous with beauty. It is associated with higher caste and class status. Kathryn Hardy points out that "These … differences seep into everyday life, separating the buffalo and the cow as discursive resources for human comparison. In Hindi and Banarasi Bhojpuri, calling a woman a *bhains* or buffalo is an insult that alludes to corpulence, stupidity and a dark complexion" (2019, 1162). The symbolic devaluation of the buffalo contrasts sharply with the praise accorded to the cow in everyday life. Cows are described as intelligent and gentle. Historian and newspaper columnist Mukul Kesavan notes that there is "a specifically Hindu sentimentality about Indian cows. For Hindus, the *desi* cow is a beautiful thing. Its large eyes, its calm, its matte skin tinted in a muted palette … its painterly silhouette with its signature hump, make it the most evolved of animals" (2015). Beauty, a superior sensibility, and generosity—these attributes make the cow more than an animal. She is at once human, divine, *and* bovine.

The Cow in the Cultural Politics of the Nation

In the past, many Hindus, including high-caste ones, ate cow meat. However, over the last 150 years, this practice has come to be regarded as anathema. During this time, Hindu religious groups have mobilized to convince their fellow-believers that eating beef is a sin. So prevalent has this belief become that most upper- and middle-caste Hindus consider eating beef to be the ultimate violation of their *dharma* (righteousness). As a corollary to this, they regard any Indian who eats cow meat with revulsion and disgust. In this fraught food politics, protection of the sacred cow has been a rallying point for Hindu supremacist groups (Govindrajan 2018; Jakobsen and Nielsen 2024). "Protection" entails looking after old and infirm cows and, importantly, preventing their killing.[4] In the past, cows that had stopped giving milk were sold to traders who would slaughter them and sell the meat, hide, horns and bones for further processing. The fact that this trade was mostly in the hands of Muslims meant that "cow protection" was conveniently harnessed for the political project of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism), with its demonization of Muslims as Other (Vyas 2022, 11–24).

Even before the rise of Hindutva in national politics in the 1990s, most Indian states (with the exception of West Bengal, Kerala, Goa, and the states in northeast India) had banned cow slaughter. This led to a flourishing interstate movement of cows to the states where slaughter was allowed. In many places, the law was also widely undermined by a clandestine local economy of beef (Staples 2020). After the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the national government in 2014, it enacted legislation against interstate trade and transportation of cows. At the same time, a larger number of states banned the consumption of beef (ENS 2015). With the BJP in power and backing them, young men have formed vigilante *gau-rakshak* (cow-protector) squads to stop cow smuggling and slaughter. Their raids terrorize cattle transporters, many of whom happen to be Muslims and Dalits, by extorting money, beating them up and, sometimes, killing them (Sinha 2024). Farmers can no longer sell unproductive cows and make some money, so they simply let them loose. All over north India, herds of feral cattle roam unhindered, entering agricultural fields and ravaging standing crops. No one dares to protest or take action because it would invite the wrath of the cow vigilantes. The widespread damage to the agrarian economy is particularly acute in the case of Muslim traders and Dalit artisans who have traditionally earned a living from selling and processing cow meat, leather, and bone. If the sacred cow inspires love and reverence amongst some, she now also evokes fear and dread among others.

Milk for All: Industrialized Dairying and Its Impacts

Inseparable from the apotheosis of gau-mata (cow-mother) is the economy and ecology of milk.[5] As mentioned above, keeping cows, buffaloes, and goats has been an integral part of the small-holder farming that characterizes agriculture in India (Ramdas 2018). Feeding on crop residues and grazing on village pastures, their dung fertilizing fields, milch cattle not only provided milk but were part of an ecological loop that made low-input farming sustainable. As a perishable product in a hot climate where access to refrigeration was limited, most milk was locally consumed. Cream from excess milk was churned into butter and made into ghee, which extended its shelf life. The leftover buttermilk, which was full of proteins and minerals but had no economic or ritual value, was freely distributed to laborers and poorer families. Milk production and consumption were, thus, limited for the most part to farmers' immediate locality. However, the demand for milk from a growing urban population far outstripped what this mode of production could supply. Milk became scarcer in the summer months when most cows and buffaloes yielded less, mainly due to heat stress. Until the 1970s, the government would ban the commercial production of milk-based sweets in the summer months so that milk would be available to domestic consumers. Despite this restriction, milk had to be rationed. Depending on its size, each urban household was given a token for the amount that it could buy from a government milk depot.[6] In a country where the Hindi phrase "*jahaan doodh ke nadiyan behti hain*" [where rivers of milk flow] is used to convey a land of prosperity, and where the phrase "*doodho nahaao, phalo pooto*" [Bathe in milk, give birth to sons] is commonly used to bless young women, the scarcity of milk denoted not just a dietary lack but a larger state of deprivation in which aspirations to the good life went unfulfilled.

In January 1970, the Indian government launched Operation Flood. Billed as the largest dairy development program in the world, it was financed by the European Economic Community (EEC) which donated its surplus skimmed milk powder and butter oil to India, while the World Bank gave additional funds. The EEC provided technical assistance for crossbreeding Indian cows with European breeds of the species *Bos taurus*, such as Jersey and Holstein-Friesian, that were bred to reach puberty earlier and give much more milk.[7] To boost milk production, the program also focused on providing cows with green fodder and nutritional supplements like oilcake and soybean meal. Besides its scale, the unique selling point of Operation Flood was that it linked thousands of village-level cooperatives of dairy farmers with urban consumers in a national grid. Producers brought their milk to their cooperative's collection center and from there it was taken in trucks to a chilling plant. It then traveled in refrigerated tankers to the district dairy where it was pasteurized. Some milk was kept back for product manufacture while the rest was taken by tankers

to city dairies where it was recombined with the skimmed milk powder and butter oil donated by the EEC. Then it was packaged in plastic sachets or taken in tankers to bulk vending outlets for sale to customers thirsty for milk (George 1985a, 2166). Fittingly, the organization that the National Dairy Development Board established in 1975 to manufacture, market, and sell milk products was named *Mother Dairy*.

Within two decades, Operation Flood had transformed the milk economy in India (Scholten 2010). Production increased manyfold and middle-class urban consumers could indulge their desire for milk, yogurt, paneer, and ice cream to their hearts' content. India became the largest milk producing country in the world and the fact that it had done so by following a unique model of organizing farmers into cooperatives made this success story a legend in international development circles. Many called it the White Revolution, a name that echoed national pride in the Green Revolution, the project of resource-intensive farming launched in the 1970s that had made India self-sufficient in wheat and rice (Siegel 2018). The White and the Green Revolutions shared several common features: initial transfers of technology from industrialized countries as "international aid;" the resource intensification of production; the dependence on synthetic chemicals and pharmaceuticals; the creation of national commodity chains; the claims about the prosperity of farmers and the health of consumers. Like the Green Revolution, the White Revolution has been criticized for being ecologically unsustainable (Ramdas 2018); for increasing social inequality; for worsening diets and nutrition; and for choking off indigenous alternatives that were more accessible and sustainable (George 1985b). Regardless of whether they have large herds or small, it is undoubted that most dairy farmers are today embedded in an industrial mode of milk production. Not only are many of their inputs manufactured in capital-intensive processes, their output is processed and distributed through a capital-intensive, fossil-fuel dependent network. Most of all, gau-mata has become a milk-producing machine, bred for early puberty, frequent pregnancies, and increased lactation (Narayanan 2023).

The Rise of Cow's Milk

During most of this period, buffaloes provided the larger share of milk in India. With the spread of crossbred cows and subsidies from the White Revolution package, the share of cowmilk began to rise and, in 2020 and 2021, cows edged past buffaloes to become the chief producers of milk. According to the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, most of this increase came from crossbred cows that on average yielded 7.2 kg per day, as compared to buffaloes' top yield of 6.4 kg (Rampal 2022). Most consumers still preferred buffalo milk for its creaminess; its higher fat and solids content made it more suitable for making yogurt (an everyday

practice in middle-class households), ghee, and paneer. However, as the supply of cowmilk increased, marketers seized an opportunity to capitalize on it.

Until the mid-2010s, Mother Dairy's plastic packets of milk were distinguished only by their fat content—skimmed, low fat, full cream—and price. The packets did not mention whether the milk was from cows or buffaloes. Since Mother Dairy bought fresh cow and buffalo milk in bulk, processed it to adjust the fat and solids content and, in the hot months from March to September, also sold milk that was either reconstituted and recombined,[8] it did not actually reveal exactly what was in the packet. The firm currently sells 2.5 million liters of milk every day in Delhi, controlling 66 percent of the branded milk market. Its profits are based on mass-production of standardized products of assured quality, with flexibly sourced inputs. As long as the product fulfilled the Food Safety and Standards regulations, it did not matter whether the milk was fresh or recombined, buffalo or cow. Yet, in 2016, Mother Dairy launched a new product: Cow's Milk.

Speaking at the launch of the new product, a top Mother Dairy executive said that "Cow Milk has been an integral part of our heritage which is well engrained in our tradition for its varied health benefits." He went on to add that "With evolving consumer needs, the awareness for Cow Milk has been increasing, paving way for its demand by mothers …"[9] This statement needs to be examined closely. Why did "consumer needs" evolve into an "awareness for Cow Milk"? Some of the affluent urban milk consumers that we spoke to mentioned that buffalo milk was "heavy." Its higher fat content, which was earlier valued as giving it a creamy, fuller taste, was now perceived as a drawback by people with sedentary lifestyles, struggling to stay slim and avoid heart diseases and obesity. Cowmilk was lighter, they said. Its benefits were not just physical; it made children more intelligent and mentally agile. One well-to-do woman from an elite Brahmin family said jokingly, "*Bhains ka doodh, bhains ki buddhi*" [If you drink buffalo milk, your brain will become like a buffalo's—slow and ponderous].

Was this upper-class desire to maintain a low-fat diet, mingled with the enduring upper-caste belief in the superiority of cowmilk, strengthened by the rising political discourse about the sacred cow? Did the coming to power of the BJP in 2014 and its promotion of pseudoscientific research on the magical properties of cow products play a role in shaping popular discourse (Balakrishnan 2021, Chandrashekhar 2020)? Definitive answers to these questions are hard to establish. However, the invocation of "heritage" and "tradition" by the Mother Dairy executive specifically in relation to the cow—and not the buffalo, which is equally a part of Indian heritage and much more so than the crossbred cow—is a tell-tale sign of the larger cultural politics that converged with capitalist production.

By 2019, cowmilk constituted approximately 25 percent of all of Mother Dairy's milk sales in the Delhi region. A milk vendor said that it was popular with teashop

owners because it was cheaper than full-cream buffalo milk and creamier than low-fat milk. He also pointed out that people believed that cowmilk was easier to digest and therefore suitable for young children. "*Bilkul maa ke doodh jaisa hota hai*" [It's just like mother's milk]. Shrewd pricing and a claimed affinity between human mothers and the cow indicate the profitable convergence of industrial capitalism and religion.

How Pure Is My Milk? Anxieties and Aspirations

Even as the White Revolution made milk available in larger quantities year-round to middle-class urban Indians, it also caused some consumers to wonder exactly what they were drinking. Even big brands such as Mother Dairy and Amul that stridently assert that they have stringent quality checks have been touched by scandal where samples of their milk were found to be substandard or adulterated.[10] Besides the age-old practice of watering down the milk, a new range of harmful additives has proliferated: urea, melamine, detergents, hydrogen peroxide, ammonium sulphate, vegetable oil, and others (Azad and Ahmed 2016). Then there are the chemicals ingested by or injected into the cow—pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones—that make their way into her milk. Realizing that even buying from established mass-market brands cannot guarantee purity, a section of well-to-do consumers began to patronize private firms that claimed to do a better job. Country Delight, for example, started in 2015 and announced "We are bringing fresh and natural back" with locally sourced, rigorously tested milk. Whyte Farms and the Farmery went one better by offering fresh organic milk, free from additives and preservatives. With prices that are 30 to 50 percent higher than that of Mother Dairy's cowmilk, it is only the affluent who can afford such brands. However, since the industrialization of diets has meant that consumers are cut off from the commodity chains that feed them, they are willing to spend more if it assuages their anxiety about quality. Eating pure, fresh, and natural have become even more important since the COVID-19 pandemic when concerns about health and immunity from diseases inevitably led people to examine what they ate and how it was produced. Firms that can assure consumers that their products are pure are positioned to profit more per liter of milk.

This rising trend of cowmilk sales in India experienced an unexpected shift around 2020. As the pandemic heightened anxieties around food quality among consumers, there was a growing buzz around a new element in the milk discourse: A2. The A2 narrative started twenty years earlier in New Zealand when a milk company called the A2 Corporation started to highlight scientific studies that claimed a correlation between the presence of certain forms of beta-casein proteins in milk called

A1 and the occurrence of Type 1 diabetes in children, heart disease in adults, autism, and schizophrenia. The corporation marketed its own milk as having only the "safe" A2 protein variant.[11] Besides commercial advertising, public opinion was also influenced by the publication of the book *Devil in the Milk* which corroborated the claims about A1 bad and A2 good (Woodford 2007). Expectedly, the claim that milk with A2 protein was safer and superior to milk with A1 protein resulted in outrage from other milk producers in Australia and New Zealand whose Holstein-Friesian and Jersey cows produced milk with both A1 and A2 protein variants. They pointed to other scientific studies that found no link between A1 milk and chronic diseases. As the controversy spread to other milk-producing and milk-consuming parts of the world, the European Food Safety Authority examined the evidence and declared in 2019 that there was no causal link between the consumption of A1 milk and the incidence of non-communicable diseases. Yet, despite the debunking of its claims by authoritative regulatory bodies, the A2 milk company went on to acquire a significant market share in Australia as well as exporting to China. A few other Australian milk producers also decided to join the A2 milk bandwagon, labeling their product "naturally A2."

As mentioned, the sale of milk labeled as A2, and the media buzz about its health benefits, only started in India in 2020. Those in the mass milk business were quick to denounce this new development. RS Sodhi, the chief executive of Amul, one of India's largest cooperative-based milk companies, called A2 milk a "marketing gimmick" (Pandey 2021). He pointed out that 90 percent of all milk in India had A2 protein. All indigenous breeds of cows in India as well as nearly 50 percent of crossbred cows produced A2 milk. *So did all the buffaloes* (italics added; de Oliveira et al. 2021). Most of the milk being supplied in India was A2 milk by default. The boutique private firms who were packaging their milk as A2 and charging a 30 to 90 percent premium were, literally, milking a gullible public.[12]

In this context, science-based claims about the superiority of A2 milk came together with the (pseudo) science-based claims about the sacred cow's magical properties. Consumers were told that milk from crossbred cows had the "bad" A1 protein. It was milk from indigenous breeds that had the "good" A2 protein. In other words, milk from "foreign cows" was bad for you while milk from desi cows (breeds of Zebu such as Gir and Sahiwal), was good for you. Only this was the pure milk of the gaumata. (As expected, the buffalo—the backbone of the Indian dairy economy—figured nowhere in this narrative despite its milk having A2 protein.) The promotion of desi cowmilk by popular yoga gurus like Baba Ramdev and Acharya Manish may also have influenced consumers.[13] In the mass market for milk that had seen cowmilk emerge as a differentiated product only in 2016, the invention of a new product called "Desi Cow A2 Milk" in 2020 was a remarkable marketing coup. This feat, however, could not have been achieved without the prior cultivation of a cultural field in which the sacred cow, mother to the nation, was already associated with goodness and purity.

The emergence of the A2 phenomenon led high-end milk producers like Country Delight, Whyte Farms, and Farmery, with their herds of crossbred cows, to also invest in desi cows. After all, the milk fetches a handsome premium that more than makes up for the lower yield. Interestingly, Country Delight has also started selling desi buffalo milk, its most expensive product category, even though *all* buffaloes in India are desi. Here desi connotes authenticity, wholesomeness, and a generic sense of being "good for you."[14] However, these firms also emphasized the hygienic condition in which the cows were kept and milked, the rigorous testing of milk, the "straight from the farm to your home" supply chain. Their websites feature drone footage of airy cowsheds, contented cows munching on fodder, gleaming milking machines, lab-coated technicians testing milk samples, uniformed delivery agents zooming off at break of day to visit customers, and mothers pouring out frothy glasses of milk for their children. While these images could be generic to any industrialized country's promotion of milk (see Dupuis 2002, Wiley 2014), what is noticeable is the focus on the cow, the emphasis on showing that she is well cared for, that she is not a milk machine but gau-mata.

Marketing Milk, Selling Gau-mata

In her thesis on the politics of the Indian indigenous cow, Ananya Vyas studied the advertisements of four brands of A2 Desi Cowmilk, examining "the interplay of various cultural, religious, and scientific tropes" (Vyas 2022, 69). Three tropes were most prominent: the ecological, the religious and the biomedical. The trope of ecological virtue—land, animals, humans all flourishing together—was evident in the promotional text's repeated use of "fresh," "pure," "natural," and "organic," often using these terms interchangeably. The firms also highlighted that their milk was "raw" and "unprocessed," a clear contrast from mass-market firms like Mother Dairy and Amul whose plastic packets announce that their contents are "pasteurized," "standardized," and "homogenized." While these terms promised mass-market customers that the product is hygienic and reliable, the elite customers for desi cowmilk gained confidence from an assurance about the *lack* of processing or alteration. This suggested that the milk was "closer to nature," uncontaminated by industrial inputs and processes, and hence better for health. All the brands highlighted that the milk came in "eco-friendly glass bottles." The sturdy, transparent bottle was not only recyclable but provided a tactile experience quite different from the opaque and squashy plastic packets in which mass-market milk was sold.

That this milk nourished not only the body but the Hindu soul was signaled by the emphasis that the cows were of "pure Indian breeds,"—sacred gau-matas untainted by the semen of foreign cows. Hindu sensibilities were further appealed

to by drawing attention to the care bestowed on cows: they are allowed to roam free, suckle their calves (a classic image of motherly love in Hindu India and a popular motif in calendar art), and are not subjected to the indignity of artificial insemination. The ethical treatment of desi cows touches a chord deep inside Hindu hearts, which is qualitatively different from the welfare of crossbred cows. The appeal is all the more attractive for consumers who live in urban environments where desi cows roam the streets and forage from waste dumps, ruminating rotting food and plastic bags (Baviskar 2011). By convincing potential customers that the cows are well looked after, these firms suggest that they are not only buying superior milk but also gaining the religious merit of serving cows (*gau-seva*).

Finally, almost all the promotional literature prominently features the term A2. Some mention it on their websites; others proudly proclaim it on the bottles. Some websites have a dedicated section explaining the difference between indigenous and foreign or hybrid breeds in which the key distinguishing element is the absence of A1 proteins in the former's milk. The scientific terms used in this section create a unified sense of authority, even as the discourse moves fluently between western biomedical, Ayurvedic, and Unani concepts, combining incompatible epistemologies (Langford 2002): the goodness of milk is extolled in terms of proteins and vitamins, as well as for balancing the humors and purifying the blood.

Vyas observes that the firms that only sell desi cowmilk tend to have names that invoke Hindu tradition. "For example, "Vedic" in the name "VedicWay" explicitly refers to Hindu scriptures. The word 'Way' in the brand's name implies that its products are located within a larger lifestyle—one validated by *divine* knowledge. Therefore, consuming this milk is likely to bring the consumer one step closer to the 'superior' path of a healthier, holistic *Vedic* lifestyle" (Vyas 2022, 74). Some of the websites quote Sanskrit verses from the scriptures about the virtues of cowmilk. Other websites point to the Zebu cow's prominent hump (absent in foreign and crossbred cows) to make the startling claim that it absorbs sunlight and converts it into minerals. Still others cite Ayurvedic texts to sell cow urine as a medicinal product and cow-dung cakes as the prescribed fuel for Hindu rituals. SwadeshiVIP, another enterprising firm whose name means "indigenous," not only sells cow products such as A2 milk and *panchagavya* (a blend of cowmilk, yogurt, ghee, urine and dung highly recommended in Ayurveda for its healthful properties) but also offers the opportunity to visit its farm and conduct cow-worship rituals, including the super-meritorious act of *gau-daan* (the gift of a cow to a Brahmin). Balancing tradition with modernity, it also offers its visitors a chance to "cuddle a cow" which it claims is a "wellness trend" that relieves stress and "promotes positivity."[15] This menu of proposed activities ends with a surefire winner: Selfie with Cows & Calves.

Dairies and Diets: The Desi Cow at Home

We turn now from the discourse around desi cowmilk to the dairies themselves. Traveling south from Delhi and entering the neighboring state of Haryana, we are greeted by a giant signboard across the highway: 'Welcome to Haryana, *jahaan doodh-ghee ka khaana*' [where the food is rich in milk and ghee]. Urban English-speaking elites often refer to the alluvial plains of the river Ganga in north India as "the cow belt." The term is pejorative, connoting rustic backwardness and resistance to change. This region is also the heartland of Hindutva politics which has polarized people of different religions and castes. This is also where a number of urban professionals are now returning to set up farms that are "sustainable, holistic, and ethical." For their customers, the fact that these agrarian entrepreneurs "gave up" successful careers in the corporate sector indicates their sincerity and commitment. The desire to renounce material wealth and leave the rat race to pursue a meaningful life in harmony with the environment resonates with many people disenchanted with their world. The dairies run by these deep-pocketed dropouts do not seem to compromise on caring for the land and animals. Visiting them and buying their (very expensive) products offers a new way of connecting to the cow belt. Instead of distance, disdain, and suspicion about sharp practices, there is now a direct relationship where one can see the cows that one's milk comes from and watch them being fed, watered, and milked. Along with the discourse about the health and environmental benefits of desi cow products, the experience of actually witnessing the lives of cows wields persuasive power.

Even amidst the densely built-up environs of Delhi, small dairies continue to flourish. Not all middle-class consumers buy Mother Dairy and Amul milk packets. Some prefer to patronize local *doodhvala*s [milk vendors]. Every morning and evening, one can see a steady stream of customers with *dolchi*s [stainless steel canisters] swinging in their hands and entering the shed where cows and buffaloes are milked right in front on them. Several of them have said that packaged milk was made from powder. "It isn't *asli* [real] milk. This milk I can see coming straight from the cow. *Ismein milaavat nahin hai* [There's no adulteration in this]." At one such *gau-shala* [cow shelter] attached to a temple in east Delhi, customers bought milk and also came to feed the cows and, on ritual occasions, worship them. These acts of charity and piety exist alongside widespread neglect and cruelty as cows are allowed to wander the streets, grazing at rubbish dumps, at risk of being mowed down by speeding vehicles (Baviskar 2011). Yet these contradictions only seem to reinforce the belief in the redemptive power of individual acts of caring. At least *we* are trying to do the right thing, they declare.

The desi cow dairies on the outskirts of Delhi were far more spacious than the urban cowsheds but similar in their layout: under a high corrugated tin roof, the

cows were clustered along narrow troughs full of feed. Their calves were penned in a separate section, brought in for suckling briefly and then taken away. Nearby sheds held stores of fodder. The air was redolent with the smell of fresh dung spattered on the concrete floor below the cows' feet from where it was swept and piled up in a great heap. The caretakers emphasized that cows were only fed what was "natural" and local: corn, millets, sugarcane leaves, fresh vegetables, dried guar beans, and ground chickpeas. No hormones or antibiotics. At one of the farms, we saw workers hefting a large vat of protein-rich whey from making paneer and pouring it back into the cows' feed. All the dairies were remarkably clean and some had ingenious devices to repel flies and other insects attracted by the ever-present dung. "We don't spray any pesticides," the manager pointed out.

With more than eight hundred cows, Beeja Farm is one of the largest producers of organic desi cowmilk in the Delhi region.[16] Bumping down the potholed lane off the highway, we traverse a peri-urban landscape of fallow fields and modest roadside homes that double as workshops and provision stores. Beeja Farm is a shady oasis. We chat with the owner, Anil Saini, in a cool, rustic-chic mud-and-cow dung plastered courtyard. Saini belongs to a prominent land-owning family in the village. His move from a white-collar job to dairying came after he watched a documentary film that lamented the dwindling numbers of the sacred cow; since mixed breeds had taken over, gau-mata had ritual value but rearing her was no longer commercially viable. This was Saini's epiphany. Determined to demonstrate that one could run a business centered on desi cows without government subsidies or charity handouts, *and* one that was environmentally sustainable, he bought a herd of Gir cows from western India and started selling their milk. Pointing to the wall posters which described (in English) the benefits of desi cowmilk, *panchagayva*, and medicines made with the distilled essence of cow urine, he explained how his diversified product range made his business profitable. Switching fluidly between Hindi and English, Saini moves equally fluently from citing Ayurvedic principles to Woodford's book *Devil in the Milk*. He is such an eloquent advocate for unpasteurized A2 desi cowmilk that my research associate and I, members of the same class segment that is his potential customer base, cannot help being impressed.

After drinking tea with Saini—"See how creamy it is? That's the desi cowmilk," he points out—we walk toward the cowsheds, past the row of motorcycles used to deliver milk to customers each morning. As we approach the compound fence, dozens of cows that were lounging about chewing the cud or nuzzling each other come toward us enquiringly. Each one is a rich chestnut brown—the distinctive color of Gir cattle—with the drooping ears and small horns characteristic of the breed. Their coats are glossy and clean, their doe eyes liquid with sentience. I reach out a hand to one as I would to a dog to scratch her under her ear but she twists her head away and licks my fingers, her gray sandpapery tongue a surprise. She is

beautiful. Am I being sentimental, as Mukul Kesavan observed Hindus tend to be in the presence of desi cows? My research associate is from northeast India, well outside the cow belt, and she is not as charmed by the animals as I am. But we agree later that they looked well fed and looked after.

Another dairy that we visited did not have an English-speaking interlocutor like Saini to show us around. Kumar, the caretaker who lived on the premises, was from rural Bihar. His first job was at a mattress factory in an industrial area. He left it four years ago to come to this farm. "At the mattress factory, although the pay was more, we also had to pay rent, and we used to constantly fall ill. The work felt like work. At this *gaushala*, we get paid less, but air is good, the food is fresh. We are healthy. And I like looking after these cows. *Yahaan alag anand hai* [There's a different kind of joy here]." The dairy where Kumar worked doubled as a breeding center. Besides Gir, there were Sahiwal and Tharpakar breeds of indigenous cows and bulls, several with colorful beads strung around their massive heads (fig. 8.2). Not only did Kumar reel off their pedigree (and cost), he claimed that he recognized each one, no mean feat in a herd of eighty cattle. Pride and affection were palpable in his voice as he started calling out, "Lakshmi, Subhadra, Janaki, Priya, Sarita, Tejas, Katrina…" popular women's names, sprinkled with those of film stars and Hindu goddesses.

Figure 8.2: Gir bull and cow at Swadeshi VIP farm. (Photo by Amita Baviskar)

It was Kumar who told us that desi cowmilk cured cancer. "Other milk gives you only *maans* [flesh], *yeh andar se taaqat deta hai* [this milk strengthens you from inside]. There was a cancer patient who took milk from us. He was cured within six months." My mind flew to the food activist who had, with equal conviction, counted out the four White Poisons: refined flour, refined sugar, polished rice, and milk. Is milk a miracle food or a poison? The answer depends on the kind of milk, how it is produced, and who consumes it. In India, for millennia, milk has been naturalized and sacralized as good to drink. The introduction of industrial inputs and processing, the insertion of long-distance supply chains, and the adoption of crossbred cows has muddied that discourse. So have new maladies and dietary movements. Many affluent consumers now report being lactose intolerant, unable to digest milk because their small intestine lacks sufficient amounts of the enzyme lactase. Some say that they find A2 milk easier to digest. It is not clear why this should be so, since A2 is a protein and lactose is a sugar and their metabolic processes are different. What is apparent, however, is that consuming milk products causes them physical discomfort—feeling bloated, getting stomach cramps, diarrhea—and A2 milk seems to offer a cure. They reported feeling less sluggish, their skin clearing up, and generally feeling "lighter." Only a tiny handful said that they had abandoned milk altogether and become vegan. Notably, none of the working-class and middle-class consumers that we spoke to mentioned being lactose intolerant or giving up milk. To them, veganism seemed like a rich people's fad. Most complained about the quality of packaged milk and many debated the virtues of cow versus buffalo milk, but none said that one should stop drinking milk. However, common to all conversations across the class spectrum was a welter of conflicting claims and a surfeit of 'scientific facts' as each person tried to make sense of their food choices in an ocean of uncertainty.

Affluent consumers look to the desi A2 cowmilk dairies to contain this uncertainty and provide a reassuring counter-narrative. Anju Singh, a 45-year-old homemaker married to a banker, buys ghee from a firm called "The Way We Were," its very name conjuring up a pre-industrial past of artisanal milk processing. "It's much more expensive than other ghee brands in the market," she says "But we love the taste. Just like the homemade ghee my mother used to make. They use original type of milk and traditional, very authentic ways." Another consumer, a retired UN official who has milk delivered from The Way We Were, when asked which company supplied her milk, replied "It's a *farm* in Noida," emphasizing its agrarian character and underplaying the commercial nature of the enterprise. Several informants mentioned how expensive the milk was but went on to say, "You have to pay more for quality." Quality, for them, mainly derived from the indigeneity of the breed of cows and nostalgia about small-scale production techniques.

A smaller set of well-to-do consumers highlighted that purity also lay in what cows were given to eat. "Organic is important to me. No pesticides, no fertilizers, no

hormones, no antibiotics. I don't want that stuff entering my body. Or my family's. My children eat out a lot. At least at home I can make sure that they get healthy food. A2 is good, sure, but it has to be organic," said Sandhya Sharma, a 56-year-old corporate executive and mother of two teenagers. Several informants mentioned the COVID pandemic as a turning point that made them more conscious about their diet. "It's all about building immunity. Gut flora and all that. Raw, natural, and unprocessed. I'm eating more millets, I'm drinking green tea. I thought of going vegan but I just can't give up *dahi* (yoghurt) and ice cream. So I buy organic A2 milk," said Surabhi, a 33-year-old television journalist.

"I don't really know if it's better for my health," said Disha. "But it's better for the cows." The 38-year-old lawyer works with an environmental justice NGO. When asked why she bought desi A2 cowmilk, she shrugged. "There's so much shit around us, so much shit we breathe in, we eat. Maybe the milk I drink makes no difference. My life is already shorter because I live in Delhi [referring to the impact of air pollution on life expectancy]. But what I'm paying extra for is a bit of kindness to cows." Disha has visited the dairy she gets milk from, "They don't inject oxytocin to get the cow to give more milk. They let the calf feed. When the cow stops giving milk, they let her be." More humane treatment of cattle goes against the grain of a dairy industry built on maximizing milk production by inducing back-to-back pregnancies, squeezing out every drop of milk, and discarding the animal when the yield declines. High-yielding milch cows frequently suffer from painful mastitis, a bacterial infection of the udders, which is treated with antibiotics and painkillers. Disha mentions Diclofenac, the most widely used painkiller in veterinary medicine, which has led to the near-extinction of vulture species across the subcontinent. The disappearance of these scavengers who fed on cattle carcasses has disrupted agroecological metabolisms, a profound shift brought on by the White Revolution. "There's so much that I can't change," said Disha. "But buying from ethical companies that treat animals well, that don't use chemicals—I think that matters."

Tradition, taste and nostalgia, concerns about their health and that of the planet, and the welfare of animals, were the reasons given by our informants to explain their switch to desi A2 (organic) cowmilk. All of them felt that it was worth spending significantly more on the product. As well-to-do people, they declared that "quality" was not something they would compromise on. Mingled with these beliefs was also, perhaps, a desire for distinction, the cultural capital gained and displayed by acts of discerning consumption (Bourdieu 1987). In everyday chitchat, as people talked about what they buy and use, a subtle game of one-upmanship is often at play. Notably, almost none of our informants referred to the religious importance of gau-mata, only to the physical, ecological, and ethical benefits of desi cowmilk. This contrasts with Vyas's research in the city of Ahmedabad in the western Indian state of Gujarat (2022) where some of her informants invoked the

divinity of the desi cow for Hindus when asserting that her milk was the best. The difference may lie in selection bias. The segment of affluent consumers that we interviewed in the Delhi region were friends and acquaintances and shared the same agnostic, areligious worldview as us researchers. Most of them were deeply averse to Hindutva politics and would avoid voicing any sentiment that suggested an overlap with cow-nationalism. Their silence skirted around the dilemma of reconciling support for "traditional" agro-pastoral practices with the divisive cultural meanings of the desi cow.

Ecological Sustainability and Animal Ethics: Critical Perspectives

Reading a draft of this paper, a friend asked, "All this is very well but, at the end of the day, isn't it a good thing that there's a growing market for milk from indigenous cows? Especially when it's organic? OK, the A2 claim is probably nonsense but so what? So what if the focus is only on gau-mata and not buffaloes? Big deal. One has to start somewhere!" I end this chapter by examining this question: Does drinking milk from desi cows, propelled by a mix of religious, medical, ecological, and class-based values, lead to more ethical, ecologically sustainable dairying? Those who sell the milk, and many of those who buy it, say that it does. Seeking an informed but independent perspective, I consulted an agronomist and an ecologist who specialized in pastoral economies. The agronomist pointed out that these dairy firms were boutique establishments whose viability depended on charging prices that were much higher than what most urban consumers could afford. Their best practices—providing more humane living conditions for cows, feeding them organic fodder, avoiding the use of growth and lactation hormones—do not trickle down to other commercial dairies that supply the national milk grid since the latter's milk production is geared to clearing minimal quality standards for maximum profits. "There is little regulation; they can get away with anything." The A2 desi cowmilk segment was a minuscule part of India's dairy industry; it could not influence the logic of the gigantic milk machine. She said, "These dairy firms make a go of it because they are run by well-off urban people. They have the financial capital *and* the social capital to invest in a network for a perishable product like milk. They spend a fortune on marketing. How many Indian farmers can do that? Even if they set up an organic milk cooperative, they can't pull it off." This dovetailed with what Anil Saini had told us: the owners of other dairies in the neighborhood came to visit Beeja Farm but, so far, none of them had moved to organic desi cowmilk. There was no demonstration effect. The agronomist was emphatic: We need to focus on transforming how millions of small-scale livestock-keepers rear milch animals and that push can only come from the government (see Ramdas 2018).

If the agronomist rejected the desi cow dairies as a role model, the ecologist I spoke to questioned the sustainability claims made about desi cowmilk. He explained that dairy firms that produce desi cowmilk draw on the rhetoric of indigenous breeds being "more suited to the local environment" but that meant only that they are more hardy and heat-tolerant, and less costly to care for. It did not mean that they were integrated into an agropastoral environment where soil, water, biodiversity, and the human population, were nourished by their relationships with each other in a more-or-less closed ecological loop (Pollan 2006). Being chemical-free was an improvement but not enough. "The bottom line is that it's a milk monoculture. What is it giving back to the land?" he said. "Manure?" I ventured. The ecologist grunted impatiently, "That's just one element. There are plenty of examples around the country of agrarian systems that combine land, water, crops, and livestock, forests and pastures, and energy for sustainable livelihoods. It's a place-specific mosaic. It works because each part fits into the other. They support each other. The only thing is, it doesn't generate much of a surplus, just enough to live on. Now, if your main goal is to produce one thing—milk—and that too for profit, you neglect the rest because it doesn't matter so much to you. As long as your cows are giving milk that you can sell at a premium, you're happy."

Anthropologist and animal rights activist Yamini Narayanan would argue that indifference about the wider ecological consequences of dairying also extends to the cows. Even if desi cow dairies do not abuse their animals in the horrific ways that she documents in her book *Mother Cow, Mother India* (2023), there is still the systemic violence of depriving calves of their mother's milk, starving male calves to death, and 'disappearing' cows once their yield declines:

> It is impossible to be the world's largest dairy farm without being among the world's biggest slaughterhouses. It is impossible to sustain dairying, an industry which *requires* continuously impregnating and breeding ever larger numbers of animals, without slaughtering the "useless" males and the "spent" females. It would be uneconomical to divert resources … towards [such] animals … The profits from selling "unprofitable" cows and buffaloes from dairying are used to buy more of these animals for the milk sector (Narayanan 2023, 44).

According to Narayanan, everyone reacts with "moral affront" to the idea that dairying is inherently cruel (2023, 17). It is an open secret that male calves and barren cows must be culled but, so explosive is the issue of cow slaughter in north India, we could not get anyone to talk about it. Dairy owners said that, as their milk reduced, the cows were given away to poorer farmers. Others said that they sent their cows to charitable shelters where they were looked after in their old age. Unlike Radhika Govindrajan's account of rural women in the Himalayan foothills

who lovingly cared for their animals but accepted their killing as a fact of life (2018), there seemed to be no possibility in the Hindu heartland of talking about a good death for a cow. To deny that death, and to draw a curtain across the work of Dalit and Muslim communities who dealt with its discomfiting reality, was essential to the success of the desi cow milk dairy. Devotion to gau-mata, beliefs about the purity of her milk and dedication to gau-seva (service) did not transcend the brute facts of running a business for profit.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced the career of the desi cow within the larger cultural politics of Hindu nationalism. I examined how the idea of the sacred cow informs a cultural field where milk from indigenous cow breeds has newfound appeal among elite urban consumers. Concerns about health, nutrition and food safety, animal welfare, and ecological sustainability figure large in this set of relations between dairy owners, marketers, and consumers. At the same time, the promise of "from our farm to your home" speaks to a yearning that food should form a face-to-face community; it should be produced and consumed at a scale that is intelligible and trustworthy. However, desi cow dairies that work within the commercial calculus of capitalism and their customers cannot escape the inherent contradictions of gau-mata being rendered a milk machine. The violence of culling calves and cows may occur behind the scenes but acknowledging it brings to light the paradox of the sacred that must be profaned. This is the touchstone that clarifies, as we say in Hindi, *doodh ka doodh aur paani ka paani* [milk from water, like wheat from chaff].

This begs the question: What would it take to create a more coherent and inclusive ecological politics around milk in India? Ideologically, it would mean extending an ethics of care beyond the sacred cow to other living beings. Besides the desi cow, buffaloes and hybrid cows should also not suffer being exploited to death. Practically, this would mean joining hands with animal activists to ensure more humane treatment of all animals. Integrating animals into an ecological loop would entail supporting farmers' organizations that practice diversified, low-input agropastoral livelihoods. Since these yield a smaller surplus, consumers will have to learn to be content with less, eating fewer milk-based sweetmeats for instance. Those who protest that poor Indians need more milk protein in their diet must be made to re-examine the emphasis on vegetarianism and the violence of caste and religion-based proscriptions that stigmatize eating meat and criminalize eating beef. Above all, it would mean taking on the behemoth that is the national industrial dairy grid and dismantling it by changing laws, incentives, and subsidies. The desi cowmilk market has emerged from the awareness that there is something deeply

wrong in what we eat and how it is grown. Transforming that ethical, emotional, and physical discomfort into an emancipatory ecological politics requires reaching out to others and transcending class, caste, and religion to embrace the Other. The desi cow can be credited for starting that conversation.

Notes

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[2] I use the plural 'we' when referring to my research associates and me.

[3] The cultural politics of vegetarianism is a complex topic to summarize. See the special issue on "Food: Memory, Pleasure and Politics" in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31 (2008) for articles that analyze the changing dynamics around this practice. Also see Jacob and Natrajan 2020 for an informative statistical outline of these changes.

[4] Notably, protection is not extended to male calves or bulls. Most male calves of the Zebu are killed or starved soon after birth. In the past, many were reared to adulthood to be castrated and used as draught animals for ploughing and pulling carts but, with the spread of tractors and motorized vehicles, the use of bullocks has declined significantly.

[5] As well as cow dung and urine. See Münster this volume.

[6] In Delhi, these milk booths were started in 1959 by the Delhi Milk Scheme of the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

[7] Unlike most species, *Bos indicus* and *Bos taurus* can interbreed. Cross-breeding was necessary since pure-bred European cows cannot tolerate tropical heat.

[8] Recombined milk is a homogenized product made by mixing milk fat, non-fat milk solids and water, while reconstituted milk is made by mixing whole or skim milk powder and water. See the National Dairy Development Board webpage (https://www.nddb.coop/ccnddb/milk-z-facts).

[9] Mother Dairy press release, June 21, 2016.

[10] For instance, see these news reports from 2015: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/now-detergent-found-in-mother-dairy-milk-sample/article7322460.ece and 2018 https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/delhi-milk-consumers-alert-amul-mother-dairy-samples-found-sub-standard-water-milk-powder-was-mixed/1156244/

[11] In 2004, the company was fined in Australia for making misleading health claims.

[12] These claims and counterclaims are reflected in the sudden shifts in the Indian government's regulatory policies. On August 21, 2024, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) issued a notification stating that the "use of any A2 claims on milk fat products is misleading" and producers should remove such claims from their products and websites immediately. Five days later, however, the FSSAI withdrew the order, stating that "further consultation and engagement with the stakeholders" was required (Kaul 2024). One can only imagine the hectic lobbying that must have preceded both these decisions.

[13] In a YouTube video, Acharya Manish claims that buffaloes were deliberately introduced to India by the British to make the natives dumb and docile; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-oQDUC54-CQ.

[14] The opposition between *desi* and *vilayati* foods, plants and animals, fertilizers, fabrics, and other items of everyday life has a lineage that stretches back to colonial times. See Gold and Gujar 2002.

[15] See SwadeshiVIP's website: https://swadeshivip.com/visit-farm. Accessed May 20, 2024.

[16] The names of farms and informants have been changed to maintain anonymity except when the information is drawn from websites in the public domain.

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CHAPTER 9

Ecologies of Gods and States: Theogenic Soils and Forests in the Blang Mountains, China

Daniel Mohseni Kabir Bäckström

Abstract

This chapter traces how relations between Blang communities and their upland environment has changed with the recent arrival of the Chinese state. It begins by analyzing how the change from swidden/shifting to paddy cultivation has transformed soil fertility from being theogenic (caused by gods) to anthropogenic. It then analyzes how these changes have created competing conceptualizations of what constitutes a forest, and the resultant effects on biodiversity. The chapter then explores the underlying change in the logic of how to solve environmental problems, from a relational to a manufacturing logic. Finally, it analyzes how Blang communities' perceived lack of ability to change these relations are related to state curtailment of the previous techniques used to create freedom of action.

Keywords: Ethnic minorities, Zomia, spiritual ecology, Buddhism, ritual ecology.

In China's southwest, in Yunnan province's Xishuangbanna prefecture, lies an upland region called the Blang Mountains, which stretches across both sides of the international border with Myanmar. The area is part of Zomia or the Southeast Asian Massif—denoting interconnected uplands stretching across parts of South, East, and Southeast Asia; a demographic shatter zone, historically beyond the pale of lowland political control (Michaud 2010; Scott 2009; van Schendel 2002). The area is named after a Mon-Khmer speaking group of people who call themselves Blang (布朗族).[1] Like many indigenous communities across the globe, Blang communities historically practiced a form of swidden/shifting cultivation that ensured a high degree of biodiversity while sustaining livelihoods away from lowland states. However, Blang communities are better thought of as maroons than indigenous. Most villages and *gagun* (usually translated as "clans") trace their histories to different waves of migration from the lowlands, escaping slavery, oppression, epidemics, or war. When the Blang Mountains began to be incorporated into the nascent People's Republic of China in 1953, Blang communities were living in self-governing villages that operated based

on a form of direct, consensus democracy through village general assemblies (*pom yung*). The last seventy years of history has seen great transformations of Blang societies and ecologies. Politically, the Chinese state has begun to exercise increasing influence over villages. Agriculturally, communities have been forced to give up swidden/shifting cultivation for fixed-plot paddy cultivation, while the forest has been turned into a nature reserve. Economically, the arrival of the state was first accompanied by poverty caused by the ban on opium cultivation, but has now been replaced by wealth from Pu'er tea cultivation, which boomed in value in the first decades of the new millennium (see, e.g., Hung 2015, 12; Ma 2021, 93). Ecologically, agricultural changes have led to a great loss of biodiversity and the need to employ fertilizers and agrochemicals, a practice Blang people categorically frown upon.

I have yet to encounter any environmental movements in the Blang Mountains.[2] In this respect, the chapter differs from the other cases analyzed in this book. In the Blang Mountains most environmental crises are still on the horizon, and have yet to affect communities enough for people to feel the need to organize environmental movements. For the problems that already exist, people in the Blang Mountains do not currently see a way of solving them without running afoul of government policies (and the state's monopoly on violence), the cost of which is still considered too great. The Blang Mountains is not a site for a budding spiritually informed environmental movement directly comparable to the other cases in this book. However, as I argue in this chapter, an analysis of Blang cultivation practices can offer key insights into the benefits such movements have to offer.

James C. Scott and other researchers investigating upland Southeast Asia, and "ungoverned" zones around the world have long noted that everything from social organization to cultivation practices are self-consciously developed in juxtaposition and opposition to lowland modes (e.g., Scott 2009, 29–30). While the lines of schismogenesis—the practice of creating a difference between neighboring groups of people—are more complex in Blang communities than among the upland groups in Scott's study, Blang communities clearly situate their cultivation practices in juxtaposition to lowland modes. Therefore, the historical origins of Blang communities and their pre-People's Republic of China (PRC) social organization and practice of agriculture can be seen as a political and environmental movement—a movement of people consciously leaving behind states and fixed-field plots.

Swidden/shifting cultivation is no longer practiced among Blang and neighboring communities on the Chinese side of the border, but it is nevertheless still invoked to conceptualize problems of soil fertility, biodiversity, and pests. Shifting cultivation can in a sense be understood as a conscious historical movement for

dealing with the environmental crises that would result from bringing lowland modes of cultivation into the uplands. Today, many Blang people continue to locate the origins of budding environmental problems in the recent replacement of swidden/shifting with fixed-plot cultivation. As I discuss below, this transformation was, in effect, a transformation from theogenic to anthropogenic practices. Juxtaposing these two forms of cultivation and forest preservation speaks to the book's theme.

I will begin by investigating methods for ensuring soil fertility. I will show how the transformation from swidden/shifting to fixed-plot cultivation entailed a transformation from theogenic to anthropogenic practices, that is, from soil fertility being ensured by returning land to divine possession, to the addition of man-made fertilizers and agrochemicals. I will discuss how conservation and environmental care are constituted very differently under theogenic and anthropogenic practices—in the latter as a motivation for human activity or inactivity, and in the former as an essential condition of the cosmos—and how climate change is forcing us to think less anthropogenically. Then I will turn to the question of forest conservation and biodiversity, showing the differences in what constitutes a forest under both theogenic and anthropogenic practices. I will show how local narratives suggest that the loss of biodiversity during the last decades might in part be the result of an impoverished conception of what constitutes a forest, and I will argue that this indicates the importance of a diversity of knowledge systems informing conservation efforts and environmental movements.

As I explore the underlying logics of technology involved in theogenic and anthropogenic practices, I will further argue that Blang theogenic practices are based on a relational logic, while anthropogenic practices are based on a manufacturing logic. From this perspective, what made theogenic practices successful in maintaining biodiversity and soil health was not their cosmology as such, but the logic of using relationality, as opposed to the use of manufacturing to solve certain problems. This begs the question of whether spirituality or religion is necessarily the important point of comparison. Finally, I analyze Blang narratives about the impossibility of action, suggesting that one of the main problems Blang communities face is that the tools and means they previously employed to ensure the freedom to organize and reorganize their relations with the surrounding world—the ability to escape historic states—has been lost to the current state's encroachment, and that communities have yet to find new tools and means to ensure this freedom. I argue that this reflects a broader problem: maybe what the world needs is not new spirituality, motivations, or visions of the future, but rather new tools for ensuring the freedom to reorganize social relations.

Theogenic Soils

The following conversation took place on June 23, 2023. I had gone to visit the *dazhan*, the person appointed by the village to manage the temple and dispatch ghosts. We chatted as he cooked lunch:

DMB: Do you use any agrochemicals (农药) when you grow corn and paddy rice?

Dazhan: Usually we don't use agrochemicals for corn and paddy rice, but if there's a lot of pests you have to use it, even though it's bad for you, because if not, you don't get any corn.

DMB: What about back when people grew hill rice? There were no agrochemicals back then.

DZ: Yes, back then we would just do some *mixin* (迷信).[3] We would invite the abbot (大佛爷) to recite in the field for two days, then it would rain and the pests would stay away. People still do it and there are fewer pests afterwards but they don't stay away, there are still some … There's a lot of illness (病毒高); therefore the pests are still around after we do *mixin*. It's like with salt and msg. Now old people have all these illnesses. In the past the old people lived until they were ninety years old—now at fifty they already have illnesses. It's the same with the land. These days people use fertilizers and agrochemicals so the land is sick and that causes the pests. Before it was caused by ghosts and gods….

DMB: Is there a way to change the illness [of the land]?

DZ: There's no way (没办法). If it's caused by gods or ghosts you can change it.

In the *dazhan*'s narrative, the illness of the land is rooted in the use of fertilizers and agrochemicals; just as human health has declined because of food additives (salt and MSG), soil health has declined because of artificial additives. The use of fertilizers and agrochemicals is, for my Blang friends and interlocutors, deeply rooted in the switch from swidden/shifting to fixed-field cultivation.[4] When I ask about fertilizer use, a common response is "now that we are not allowed to shift anymore, we have to use fertilizers." The *dazhan*'s final response is important. For him, soil fertility, pests, and telluric illness can be affected if it is caused by gods or ghosts, but not if it is caused by the use of fertilizers and agrochemicals. While Blang communities have tools for interacting with gods and ghosts to ensure relations of "mutual aid" between themselves and these non-human others, removing the illness of the land would entail abandoning fertilizers and agrochemicals, something communities cannot do because they are not allowed to shift. This statement really captures the crux of the problem. Gods can be influenced, the state cannot. To understand this, we have to first investigate how Blang communities ensured soil fertility before the arrival of the state.

One of the most important developments in ecology was the realization that many places previously thought of as untouched wilderness were actually created by indigenous practices. In places like the Amazon, historical ecology traces human impact by studying what is called "anthropogenic soils:" that is, soils created by human activity. These studies have shown the positive impact on biodiversity by indigenous practices like swidden/shifting agriculture (see, e.g., Balée and Erickson 2006; Bruun et al. 2018; Cairns 2015; Fa et al. 2020; Levis et al. 2020; and Padoch and Pinedo-Vasquez 2010). However, the concept of anthropogenic soils and ecologies makes little sense in the Blang context. The soils and ecologies surrounding Blang communities might better be described as "theogenic," because soil became fertile not through human but divine activities. Let me explain.

When the ancestors of Blang communities first moved to the mountains to escape oppression, pandemics, and calamities in the lowlands, they left behind a domain ruled by an earthly king; but the mountains were not *terra nullis*. Instead of living within the domains of earthly kings, they established their new villages within the domains of divine kings. The earliest research into Blang communities can be found in a series of Chinese ethnographic reports collected in the three-volume work *Bulangzu shehui lishi diaocha* (*BSLD*) penned between 1956 and 1984. These reports unanimously describe the land as communally owned, with possession rights annually distributed by the village. However, my fieldwork shows that this is not how Blang communities view land ownership. According to my friends and interlocutors, all land surrounding a Blang village is owned by the local mountain god (*devara gong*) who is "like a king." The exact process of land allotment differed from village to village, but the general steps were as follows:

First, divination was employed to select the land to open. The *BSLD* reports that in one village, the abbot would divide rice received from the laity into three bamboo containers and place a piece of banana leaf with the name of a mountain inscribed into each. The exact selection method is unclear—we are simply told that he recited a sutra asking the gods which direction to cultivate in (Yao and Huang 2009, 33). In another village, it reports that the *daman* would look for land that made a good combination of "cold and warm," and had been fallow long enough. He would then bring offerings to the abbot who would divine based on seven bamboo containers of rice. Selection was made by measuring the rice as "sufficient" or not (Yang, Wang, et al. 2009, 5). The text is unclear but it likely describes *but me*, a common form of rice divination whereby an elder or monk recites a prayer and takes out an amount of rice which is then tallied to see if it forms an even number of pairs, meaning a success, or an odd number, meaning failure. After the direction of cultivation had been selected, the villages would call a general assembly (*pom yung*) and divide the land among themselves. In a third village, the process was reversed. First, the entire adult population would select land, then they would

consult the *bomo* or *buzhan* (Blang: *dazhan*) to divine whether the selected land would be fortuitous, and if not they would re-select (Yang, Zhou, et al. 2009, 49).

After the land had been selected and divided among the households, the village would have to ask the local mountain god for permission to "open" land for cultivation. The village would collectively present offerings to the mountain god, who in return would allow them to use his land. While Blang people describe the mountain god as being "like a king," the village's relations with him are not described as ruler-subject, but rather, in terms of "mutual aid" (互相帮助; Blang: *u zhoi mi, mi zhoi u*) or "mutual care" (互相照顾). Rather than conceiving of the gifts presented to the god as a form of tribute, Blang people instead say that "we are good to [the god], so [the god] is good to us."

After land is cultivated for one or two years, soil fertility declines. Therefore, people would return it to the mountain god, allowing it to become forest again, restoring its fertility. Calling these soils anthropogenic only makes sense within an ontology that divides the forest and human habitation along the lines of society and nature (cf. Descola 1992; [1986] 1994; 2006; [2005] 2013); if the village is understood as society and the forest as nature, then human intervention in the forest must be understood as anthropogenic. However, such a division does not make sense for many of the world's people, including Blang communities. As Descola has famously described, for many Amazonian communities, the forest is a continuation of social relations, rather than a separate space of nature (e.g., Descola [1986] 1994). While this could also be said for Blang communities, the more important concept to think with here is possession. While the *BSLD* argued that Blang communities primarily practiced communal ownership of the means of production, that is not how Blang communities conceive of it. From their perspective it would be more correct to say that Blang communities live under divine ownership of the means of production. Yet despite divine ownership, land can be in the possession of humans.

Due to the decline in soil fertility, the land would fluctuate between human and divine possession. This makes for a very different way of perceiving the forest. The phenomenological difference in perception (cf. Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002) between myself and my friends and interlocutors is indicative and instructive of this difference. When foraging in the forest with elders, they would often point at some patch of forest and say something like "over there I used to grow corn," or "that is where Da Sam Di's son used to live in a small hut." In what I perceive as a contiguous space of forest, Blang elders see a varied patchwork of historical fluctuations between human and divine possession. Within this fluctuation, human activity is understood to deplete the soil, which is restored when land returns to the mountain god's possession. From this perspective, the soil and biome cannot be conceived as "natural," nor as anthropogenic, but is best described as theogenic, since it is the result of divine activity and ownership.

When juxtaposing theogenic soil practices with fixed-field cultivation, the concept of anthropogenic soils becomes pertinent again. In the *dazhan*'s narrative, it is human practices—such as the application of fertilizers and agrochemicals—that have replaced divine activity and resulted in a previously unseen problem, namely illness of the land, causing pests which cannot be removed through appeasing the gods—an illness caused by the transformation from an alternating anthropogenic and theogenic process into a purely anthropogenic one. We can thus reconceptualize this recent transformation as one from theogenic to anthropogenic soils.

Understanding the recent changes to cultivation practices through the lens of theogenic soils highlights something very important for the topic of this volume. Under anthropogenic soil practices, soil fertility, conservation, and biodiversity (discussed next), are the result of either human intervention—different discourses usually define some form of intervention as preferable to others (whether that is indigenous, alternative, or industrial practices)—or as a result of human non-intervention (e.g., nature reserves). Under such conditions, the role of spirituality or religion is simply as a motivating force, determining whether human action (or inaction) is beneficial or harmful. But theogenic practices collapse the boundaries between nature and culture, and between science and religion. What are constituted as human actions under an anthropogenic practice are instead constituted as parts of cosmological interactions. The role of the mountain god is not primarily to motivate humans; instead, they constitute a key agency which the village has to navigate and negotiate with. What constitutes conservation or environmental movements under one practice, constitutes an aspect of the world itself under the other. Does this not to some extent define the present moment? It is a strange paradox that the anthropocene is characterized not by humans, but by climate change. Though it might be caused and exacerbated by human actions, climate change also acts on humans. Living in a world where there is another agency, a hyperobject (cf. Morton 2013), an ontologically alter-other that acts on humans and that humans are forced to relate to, is in fact much more similar to theogenic rather than anthropogenic practices. In such a world, what Danowski and Viveiros de Castro wrote of "Amerindian collectives" rings as true for China's upland collectives and for theogenic practices: they "are a 'figuration of the future' … not a remnant of the past" (emphasis removed; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017, 123).

Biodiversity and the Forest

Another topic of concern often intimated by my Blang friends and interlocutors is biodiversity loss. According to elders, tigers still roamed the forests in the late eighties, and many reminisce about animals and birds now disappeared. While the

forest is a place of non-human dwelling, it is still a deeply familiar place for Blang communities. Not only were many parts formerly their fields, but people often venture into the forest to forage for wild herbs, mushrooms, and vegetables, digging for crabs and catching fish. Foraging is both an important subsistence skill—"in the past, if you didn't know how to find wild vegetables (野菜), you would go hungry" as one interlocutor phrased it—and an enjoyable pastime—"Ai Zhoi (my Blang name) are you afraid of sleeping in the forest? We should go out, forage, make a fire, and spend the night there, it will be fun" as a friend suggested. Because the forest is so familiar, the radical loss in biodiversity is evident.

Biodiversity loss is reflected in different ways. On the one hand there is the nostalgia for the animals themselves ("I really miss the sound of this bird, you used to hear them all the time"), and on the other hand there is nostalgia for the joys of hunting. When I ask people about biodiversity loss, they will often echo the local government narrative, which attributes biodiversity loss to excessive hunting by "the common people" (老百姓); however, something does not add up with this arithmetic because the same person will explain that these animals are still plentiful on the Burmese side of the border, where communities still actively hunt, both for subsistence and income from the illegal wildlife trade. Likewise, it seems that biodiversity had already begun disappearing on the Chinese side before the great expansion of tea cultivation and deforestation (another commonly attributed cause). What had changed was that most communities had been forced to abandon swidden/shifting cultivation.

This is also the major difference between the Burmese and Chinese sides of the border: swidden/shifting cultivation is still practiced on the Burmese side, but banned on the Chinese. Is there a connection between swidden/shifting cultivation and biodiversity? While an understudied topic, there are clear signs in the scholarly literature that swidden/shifting cultivation plays a key role in maintaining and increasing biodiversity (e.g., Padoch and Pinedo-Vasquez 2010). I am not aware of any studies comparing biodiversity under different cultivation practices on the Chinese and Burmese side of the border, but Blang narratives certainly suggest the urgency for such a study. In the meantime, Blang communities are intimately familiar with the forest, and they can offer insights into the possible connection between cultivation practices and biodiversity. One possible connection between the ban on shifting cultivation and the loss of larger wildlife was intimated by the new village head (村长) of Man Lik. Between sips of tea, he explained:

> It's an economic problem. People need income so they grow tea. Before you would plant for one, two, three years, then the soil would run out of fertility and you had to shift. Tea trees you can plant, then have the same [plot] year after year. But when shifting there's some forest with big trees and some with small growth. Now there's a lot of forest, but it's

> all big trees. On the ground there's nothing. So there are no animals anymore, just birds at the top of the trees, and big trees, there's nothing for them to eat.

The village head's narrative highlights two important findings. Firstly, it suggests that one important aspect of the connection between swidden/shifting cultivation and biodiversity is the cultivation of a varied ecology of many different ages and types of forest. Secondly, it points to an important difference in what constitutes a forest, as well as what kinds of forests are considered important to the ecology. In the village head's narrative, forests of different ages are important, since they provide different types of growth for different types of animals. For the state, however, only primary growth forest appears to be of importance. It protects the forest from all human intervention, attempting to transform secondary growth forest into primary. Blang communities and the government thus have very different conceptions of what constitutes a forest. For Blang communities, the forest is a space they often venture into to forage, and in the past to hunt, collect firewood, and fell trees for construction or to open fields. Shifting/swidden agriculture meant that the difference between fields and forests was temporal. Still, some forest always remained forest. The most notable examples of this are the forests on mountain tops that belong to the mountain god and cannot be felled. If people try to fell trees too close to the mountain top, the god will retaliate with violence. Apart from the mountain tops, however, people were allowed to open swiddens (after presenting offerings to the mountain god, as described above). According to the *BSLD*, villages generally maintained a twelve-year cycle of land use. Most forests then, were in different stages of waiting to be fields again, and all fields were temporary, waiting to be returned to forest.

For the government, the difference between forest and field is absolute and essential. Likewise, the forest constitutes an important environmental asset. Yunnan (where the Blang Mountains are located), is the Chinese province with the highest amount of ethnic and ecological diversity (Liu, Yang, and Yin 2021), its mountains a refuge for forests and wildlife. For the government, agricultural land and forest represents a dichotomy. Historically, the state began imposing this dichotomy on Blang villages as the collectivization era ended in the early eighties. The government divided up the land and issued deeds to individual households. Land for which no one was issued a deed, the state instead claimed for itself. This created an essential divide between forest, which was always forest, and protected from human activity, and agricultural land, which was always agricultural land, and possessed by individual villagers.[5] Having divided the land into two halves, the state then spent the coming decades restricting human activity in the forest. Hunting, which had been both an important source of food, joy, and leisure, was banned by the prefectural government in 1996 (PGMT [1996] 2016), which confiscated hunting

rifles. Then, in 2009 the local government established the Bulong Prefecture Level Nature Reserve (布龙州级自然保护区), banning all tree felling.

By claiming ownership of the forest, the government has attempted to establish an overlapping sphere of sovereignty with Man La's mountain god. Now both these invisible, powerful others claim sovereignty over the forest. Both claim to own the forest, and both retaliate with violence against unsanctioned tree felling. But there is also a great difference between them: the mountain god allows human access to most of the forest if they present offerings and ask him for it; while the government does not allow anyone access to hunt or fell trees, regardless of how many gifts they provide.

The fact that the government's effort at forest conservation has not resulted in a return of larger mammals, "just birds at the top of the trees" suggests that its conservation ecology is based on too simplistic a notion of what constitutes a forest. By this conception, there is only one type of forest that matters, and that is forest which is always forest. Wild forest, primary growth forest, not anthropogenic or theogenic forest, not forest that is sometimes a field.

This is not unique for Chinese conservation efforts, nor is the conflict between state conservation projects and indigenous land management. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports conclude that land use and deforestation are key to catastrophic climate change mitigation (IPCC 2019, 21, 22, 49). Studies suggest over a quarter of forests are located on indigenous land (Fa et al. 2020). Maroon and indigenous communities live in no less anthropogenic environments than other populations, yet have outsized contributions to biodiversity and forest cover, because they developed different livelihood technologies (cf. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2019). However, instead of considering swidden/shifting cultivation as an asset that indigenous and maroon communities have employed successfully, resulting in greater forest cover on their lands, the IPCC report singles out shifting agriculture as a major cause of deforestation and suggests promoting permanent agroforestry to replace shifting cultivation (IPCC 2019, 367, 383).

While the climate change impacts of swiddens require further study, clear indications exist that swiddens constitute a superior land use for carbon capture (e.g., Bruun et al. 2018; Cairns 2015). These studies primarily focus on how swiddens bind carbon in trees and soil, but the positive climate impacts of shifting cultivation are certainly compounded by the contextual effects, usually left out of these studies. For example, contrast the technologies employed in shifting and paddy cultivation: when Blang communities cultivated hill rice, the only tools imported from the lowlands were the long knives employed to fell trees. All other tools were fashioned from local wood and bamboo. When cultivating paddy, Blang communities depend on tractors to plow the fields, as well as fertilizers and agrochemicals; all of which are dependent on fossil fuels for production and transportation into the mountains.

Blang perspectives on biodiversity loss in the last decades highlights the need for conservation efforts informed by a plurality of knowledge systems. The biomes that are home to indigenous and maroon communities are deeply shaped by what might best be thought of as a "science of the concrete."[6] As Lévi-Strauss wrote, while a science of the concrete might not produce the same results as natural science, "it [is] no less scientific, and its results [are] no less real" (Lévi-Strauss [1962] 2021, 20). The difference between state and Blang knowledge and forest conservation, is reminiscent of James C. Scott's distinction between state and popular measures for legibility. Whereas popular measures were dependent on detailed knowledge of specific fields—for example, how much seed is needed to sow this particular field—state measurements were based on a precise knowledge of generalized distance (Scott [1998] 2020, 25–33). In popular measurements, field sizes differ, but quality (such as cropping and yields) is commensurable. In state measurements, field size is commensurable, but land quality differs. A very similar process of changes to measurements took place with the coming of the People's Republic to the Blang Mountains.[7] In contemporary forest conservation, the state sees only acreage of forest conserved, while local knowledge still emphasizes the different qualities of forest. This highlights the need for environmental movements based in alternate knowledge systems, and for the importance of "sciences of the concrete" in conservation practices.

Relational Technologies and Manufacturing Technologies

Continuing to think with "sciences of the concrete," and juxtaposing anthropogenic and theogenic approaches, we can make use of Viveiros de Castro's discussion of "ecobricolage," in which he employs Lévi-Strauss' dichotomy between the engineer and bricoleur to think about the Amazon and possible climate futures (Viveiros de Castro 2019, S301). This is useful also for thinking about the difference between anthropogenic and theogenic practices. While "the engineer always seeks to open a way through and situate himself *beyond* the constraints" of the environment, the bricoleur makes "do with 'whatever is at hand'" (original italics Lévi-Strauss [1962] 2021, 21, 23). From this perspective we can see that theogenic soils employ what is at hand: depleted soils are returned to the god that owns it to be replenished, whereas paddy cultivation instead begins with a determined spatial diagram of land deeds, and adapts the soil to that schema through the addition of fertilizers and agrochemicals, produced elsewhere and imported. However, one of the key differences has to do with what is at hand for theogenic practices.

The two practices are structured on two different technological logics. Paddy cultivation solves the problem of soil cultivation through the addition of fertilizers

and agrochemicals and through the use of plows and tractors. In contemporary practice, these tools are all created through industrial manufacture. We could call this a manufactural logic. We have a problem, so we manufacture a tool to solve it. Like all humans, Blang communities routinely employ this logic. However, to solve the problem of soil fertility, theogenic soil practices also employ a different logic. Rather than employing the Haber-Bosch process to manufacture fertilizers, the theogenic process relies on sustained relations between humans and non-humans. We could call this a relational logic. One of industrial societies' biggest mistakes was thinking that other societies were at a lower level compared to themselves. When cadres from the nascent People's Republic entered the Blang Mountains to introduce industrialized agriculture, they believed themselves to be witnessing a meeting between advanced and primitive technologies. In fact, it was a meeting between two highly developed forms of technology, structured around different logics; and what they believed to be the modernizing of primitive modes of production, was actually the replacement of relational technologies by manufacturing technologies.

The question of biodiversity is a prime example of a problem that could perhaps be better solved by a relational rather than manufacturing logic. The manufacturing logic has divided the land into places for production that are meant to maximize output by the use of manufactured tools, and places for protection that are supposed to be the antithesis of manufactured as they are supposed to be completely non-manufactured, completely natural. From the perspective of technological logic, the society-nature divide can be conceived of as idealized spheres of manufacture and non-manufacture. With the previous relational technology, all land was instead part of a single system of relations, but divided into temporary places of more or less usage by one or the other part. Land would, for short periods of time, be more entangled with humans, and for long periods of time be more entangled with non-humans, but there was no difference between manufactured and non-manufactured places. In fact the logic of manufacture does not fully make sense in the relational logic. From the manufacturing logic we could say that the question is who is currently manufacturing the land, humans or gods; but this makes no sense in Blang narratives that instead discuss the forest in terms of possession and use: have humans managed to temporarily gain the possession rights to use the land from the god? This is again why theogenic is a better term than anthropogenic when thinking about swidden/shifting cultivation: anthopogenic extends the manufacturing logic from society to nature, while theogenic highlights the relational basis of this form of cultivation.

This same problem is apparent in the notion of anthropogenic climate change. This concept simply extends the notion of manufacture: industrial society does not just produce goods, it also produces climate change. From a relational logic, earth's biosphere is the result of all the beings on this planet, and the difference is not that the climate is now anthropogenic: as long as humans have been around it has been

anthropogenic, but also botanogenic, fungogenic, entomogenic, zoogenic, and so on. What has changed is that the anthropogenic part of the relations have grown negative and outsized. The manufacturing logic solution is to either manufacture a solution or to not manufacture as a solution. A relational logic solution would be to transform the relations between humans and surrounding beings, just as Blang communities return land to the mountain god when soil fertility is reduced.

The notion of relational technologies complicates the themes of this volume. From this perspective it is not the fact that theogenic soils involve beings that in a secular knowledge system would be defined as religious or spiritual that accounts for its ability to balance human livelihoods with a biodiverse, carbon positive biome, but rather the fact that it is based on a high degree of relationality to solve problems. Are these technologies more similar to a spiritually informed manufacturing technology or a non-spiritually informed relational technology? This is perhaps not an answerable question, but it helps situate the problem, namely that different questions constitute problems and solutions differently. Questions about religion and spirituality in relation to environmental crisis locates the problem within the world of knowledge, cosmology, ontology, belief, and motivation, while the question of relationality locates the problem within the world of interactions between beings, regardless of which beings are involved. These are of course not unrelated; however, it does make a difference to how problems and solutions are constituted.

Take Blang relations to mountain gods. While the question of epistemology and ontology is important, it is only the first step. Blang communities are deeply concerned not just with questions about whether mountain gods exist, but how to relate to them, such as through mutual aid. Do Blang communities have more in common with secular movements focused on mutual aid, or with religious movements with hierarchical divine relations? The Blang case highlights something very important: what has changed is not the cosmology, people's beliefs, or motivations—what has been transformed is the types of relations that people have with what surrounds them. This suggests that the question of the role of spirituality in environmental movements is much less important than the relations environmental movements make with others, be they human or non-human, secular or spiritual.

Conclusion: Political Impossibilities

This chapter has analyzed the shift from swidden/shifting to fixed-plot cultivation in the Blang Mountains to elucidate what this transformation can teach us about how religion and spirituality motivate communities in Asia to engage in environmental activities. First, we saw how this change can be understood as a transformation from theogenic to anthropogenic soil fertility practices. The analysis highlighted

the beneficial ecological role of deities. This suggests that if religion is not purged from the world into a separate domain of motivating human beliefs, deities can be active agents in local ecologies. I then interrogated the effect of this change from theogenic to anthropogenic practices on biodiversity and forest conservation. We saw that more varied conceptions of what constitutes a forest might be the key to increased biodiversity, thus highlighting the importance of a plurality of knowledge systems informing conservation projects. In the last section, we discussed the underlying logics of theogenic and anthropogenic practices. We saw that anthropogenic practices operate on a manufacturing logic, while theogenic practices operate on a relational logic. This made me question whether religion and spirituality is the important category of comparison: are theogenic soil practices more similar to divinely inspired manufacturing practices, or to atheistic relational practices? But there is one important topic which has been calling for our attention since the beginning, and that still needs to be addressed: the question of political (im)possibilities. As we shall see, what Blang communities seem to lack is not motivation (religious, spiritual, or otherwise) but new tools for reshaping social relations.

The *dazhan* in an earlier quote noted that "there's no way (没办法) [to change the illness of the land]. If it's caused by gods or ghosts you can change it." This highlights an interesting question about the possibilities for action. Why can gods and ghosts be affected, but not unhealthy soil? I think we can take the Chinese term 没办法 quite literally here. The *dazhan* has many means (办法) of handling ghosts and gods. He has a library of powerful words (*katha*) and ritual implements that he can employ to appease, coax, coerce, and compel these ontologically alter-others to leave humans alone. But he does not have any method for appealing to or expelling the government so that Blang communities can resume swidden/shifting cultivation. The following exchange I had with Ai Zham Di of Man Lik, is indicative of a general disposition:

Ai Zham Di: These days life is getting easier and easier, but we also have less and less freedom. The *chao pianling* (the king of Sipsongpanna) and the Kuomintang wanted money and things from us, but they didn't care about what we did. If you wanted to move you could move, whatever you wanted to grow, you could grow, and so on. The Communist Party got rid of the Kuomintang, so people love them.

DMB: So the Communist Party doesn't want your things and money? I have noticed that no one seems to be paying taxes.

AZD: Exactly, they don't want our money, what they want is for people to follow the law.

DMB: Do you think people agree (同意) with having less and less freedom or do they just not see a way to oppose it (没办法反对)?

AZD: There's no way to oppose it (没办法反对), if you do you will be put in prison.

Ai Zham's analysis of the current situation highlights something very important. Blang communities were founded by people who were able to establish consensus democracy governed autonomous communities that cultivated a diverse and healthy biome through mutual aid relationships with the gods and ghosts that surrounded them. This was made possible by their ability to escape lowland states. As James C. Scott has shown, this was a common practice across Zomia (Scott 2009). As David Graeber and David Wengrow conclude in their vast account of human history, this "freedom to move" was something characteristic of most of the world's population until at least "around a half-millennium ago." Graeber and Wengrow defines it as one of the "primordial freedoms" together with "the freedom to disobey, and the freedom to create or transform social relationships" (2021, 4, 426, 446). In the case of Blang communities, it was this freedom that made the other two possible. The ability to move away from states were the means they employed both to establish and maintain their alternative, autonomous communities. Representatives of lowland states might come and ask for money, but if their requests were too burdensome, villages would simply move away, something Xin Man E village did as recently as 1949 (Yang, Zhou, et al. 2009, 48), and which many individual Blang people also resorted to in 1958 when the government began closing monasteries and enacting repressive policies.[8] Of Graeber and Wengrow's three "primordial freedoms" it was the "freedom to move" that enabled all other freedoms in the Blang Mountains.

This "freedom to move" has been curtailed in several ways. Firstly, it is no longer possible for a village to simply up and leave for the other side of a mountain to avoid state extractive campaigns. To escape the Chinese state they would have to move across the border into Myanmar. Such prospects were made more difficult by the erection of a border fence during the coronavirus pandemic, and the fact that there is a state in the separatist region on the other side of the border that is considered far more extractive and unjust than the Chinese. Secondly, it would mean leaving behind a lot of wealth. With tea becoming the main source of income instead of opium, people have become much more tied to a place. The one form of escape that would still be possible is taking to the forest. This is a technique Blang individuals have employed for as long as anyone can remember, and it is always a real possibility. But this has always been intended as a temporary solution: to weather a storm.

When people in the Blang Mountains say that there is no way to oppose the government, that there is no way to deal with problems caused by telluric illness, as opposed to problems caused by ghosts and gods, what they are saying is that they lack the tools to make a change. While the local government, both at the township and prefectural level, is supposed to be part of an ethnic autonomous region, people in the Blang Mountains do not consider the government to be something

they are in control of. Their understanding is that the local government represents the national government through its top leader (领导), who they say is always Han Chinese. My own very limited experience with the local government supports my friends and interlocutors' interpretation. While the village heads and other representatives can raise certain issues, most interactions that I have experienced was with cadres coming to "explain the laws of the nation" to the village and to make sure the laws are followed.

Despite this, people in the Blang Mountains still enjoy the freedom "to do as one pleases" (随便), to a high degree, and they are aware of the difference between what one can get away with in the mountains as opposed to the lowlands. The slow eroding of this freedom helps explain most of the friction between the government and the villages, as well as why Blang communities have yet to develop new tools for affecting their situation. Between the improvements in material wealth and the high degree of autonomy that Blang villages still retain, people do not feel much need to develop new tools of resistance—at least not at the moment; but if freedom and autonomy keep eroding, and if material well-being continues to be threatened by the recent nose-dive in tea prices, the situation might change.

Roughly speaking, there are two general approaches that Blang communities could pursue in developing new technologies for allowing them to act on the ecology. Firstly, they could attempt to work with the government to carve out a larger sphere of movement. As the chapters by Chen and Li, and Qian, Liu, and Svarverud have shown, environmental concerns can be removed from the sphere of politics and find a space of action in China. It is even possible that the state's narrative of "ecological civilization" could be enrolled to create a larger space of action for Blang village communities. There is a recent trend in Chinese scholarship on the nation's ethnic minorities that focuses on how aspects of "ecological civilization" can be found in their "traditions."[9] The following excerpt from a recent journal article highlights both its deeply colonial features, but also the space of negotiation it could afford: "due to their relative backwardness in economic development, every ethnic group retains a great degree of traditional ecological conservation customs. Although these customs might appear backward in some ways, they actually promote ecological conservation in Yunnan's southwest" (Gao 2020, 42). If theogenic soil practices and their role in promoting biodiversity could be re-framed to fit this narrative, it is possible that a space could be negotiated for them under the guise of "traditional ecological conservation customs." This highlights something very important for the questions this book grapples with. The "environmental civilization" trend in Chinese scholarship suggests that the path open for working within the system would be dependent on playing into Han Chinese colonial imaginings of the ethnic minorities as primitive and backward, and utilizing the relationship between environmental civilization and tradition in order to create a space of

action. Taking such a path would involve the transformation from, for example, spiritually or religiously informed environmental movements into "traditions" or "customs."

Since Blang communities appear to have run out of places to escape the state by moving, the other approach would be to go against the government. Such a scenario seems highly unlikely; however, as scholars across the border in Myanmar have reported, what seemed impossible one day can seem self-evident the next (e.g., Edwards 2023). In Myanmar, nascent scholarship is highlighting the confluence of environmental protection and religion in relation to the Ethnic Armed Organizations (e.g., Kiik 2020; Kim 2024; Munive and Stepputat 2023). Instead of focusing on how to carve out a space of action within the confines of the Chinese state, such an approach would instead focus on again carving out a space of autonomous self-governance away from the state where alternative modes of ecology could be experimented with. Such a scenario helps highlight the possible avenues for a spiritually informed environmental movement in the Blang Mountains, were one to develop in the future. Either it can adapt to Chinese state rhetoric and bureaucracy to make a space within, or it can formulate itself in opposition in order to make a space without.

Regardless of whether Blang communities choose to adapt, or to attempt to make a space (within or without the Chinese state) for a locally informed ecology, they have one powerful tool at their disposal: consensus-based village general assemblies (*pom yung*). While consensus deliberation functions as a form of prefigurative political experimentation in many parts of the world (see e.g., Graeber 2009, 235, 242; Oba and Özsoy 2023, 2), in Blang communities it remains the default way of decision making. Being founded as a form of alternative political and ecological societies, Blang communities are already organized in ways that elsewhere constitutes prefiguration. Thus, whatever path Blang villages choose to adopt, they have the methods for rooting this decision in shared consensus.

Finally, the problem of finding methods to create a space of action for reshaping the local environment highlights something very important for the theme of this volume. For Blang communities, what is missing is not new knowledge, sources of motivation, or ideas of what the world could be like, but the tools to transform social relations. The important change from the perspective of an "anthropology of freedom" (Wengrow 2022) is precisely the access to and loss of tools to ensure the three "primordial freedoms." Blang communities have for longer than anyone can remember used escape as a tool for ensuring freedom, but with the state encroaching into the scatter zone of refuge that is the Blang Mountains, they see nowhere to escape to. The future of the Blang Mountains is dependent on the ability of upland communities to find new tools for ensuring the freedom to transform social relations and thus ensure both autonomy, freedom, and a sustainable biome. They are not alone in this

problem. This suggests that what the world needs to face climate and environmental catastrophe is not new spirituality, knowledge, or visions of the future, but new tools to enable "the freedom to create or transform social relationships."

Notes

1 According to official Chinese statistics, Yunnan is home to a population of 127,345 Blang people (NBSC 2023). However, this includes several groups that employ other autonyms and whose languages belong to other branches of Austroasiatic. The population of people who call themselves Blang is approximately 22,764, of which 14,935 live in Bulangshan township, and 7,829 in Xiding township (PGBBT 2020; PGMC 2015).

2 I first conducted fieldwork as part of my first Master's degree in the Blang Mountains in 2014. I then visited again in 2019. Stymied by the pandemic, I was not able to begin fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation until February 2023. Across my stays in 2014, 2019, 2023, 2024, and 2025, I have spent roughly eight months in the Blang Mountains.

3 *Mixin* is usually translated as superstition, but for Blang people, like many in rural China, the term does not necessarily indicate something negative. Often, as in this case, it is used to denote non-temple rituals for a specific purpose, such as dispatching ghosts. While my Blang is gradually improving, I primarily conduct interviews in Chinese, which is slowly transforming into a strange pidgin of Mandarin and local dialect, interspersed with Blang words and concepts.

4 I use the term "Blang friends and interlocutors" for a very specific reason. At the beginning of my doctoral fieldwork, I had a meeting with the abbot and the *dazhan* of Man La, in which they agreed to help me with my research. They expressed one demand and one caveat. They asked that I make sure that what I write about their practices is accurate, and that I ask them if I am unsure about anything. They also explained that "what we tell you goes for Man La [and its two related villages], but we cannot speak for other villages, they might do things differently." Having visited and conducted interviews in at least twelve Blang villages, I have come to understand the magnitude of this caveat. Every Blang village differs to varying degrees linguistically, ontologically, cosmologically, and in terms of social organization, from its neighbors; even within the same village there is great diversity. The term "according to my Blang friends and interlocutors" is thus my own humble caveat that what I relay in these pages is based on what people I have spoken to have told me, "nothing more—but nothing less" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 4). It is also a methodological meditation on the importance of different types of relationships developed during fieldwork. Time spent with my friends in the Blang Mountains has been at least as important to my understanding of Blang communities as more formal interviews.

5 Arboculture, such as rubber and tea plantations, is only legally carried out on agricultural land.

6 For Levi-Strauss a "science of the concrete" was a structured system of knowledge resulting from bricolage (employing what is available at hand). Viveiros de Castro employs the notion of bricolage to conceptualize how indigenous communities work with what is at hand to shape their ecologies, a process he calls "ecobricolage" (Viveiros de Castro 2019).

7 The *BSLD* reports that quality of land and the amount of seed required to sow a field was the key measurement in pre-PRC land allotment (the reports employ 挑, a measure word for loads carried on a pole; though Blang communities tend to employ large woven baskets carried with a forehead strap). In state allotment of land and in contemporary reports, acreage (亩)—a spatial measurement—is instead employed.

[8] In official historiography 1958 marks the beginning of the Great Leap Forward. In Man La historical discourse, the year 1958 is often used by itself to define the beginning of state repression and control. For some elders it marks the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, while other elders distinguish between this longer period and the actual Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and refer to 1958 as the year the government closed the temples. In both periodizations the era from 1958 until the temples were reopened in the early eighties constitutes an era of state repression. For many elders, 1958 marks the year they went from not having a state to having one.

[9] I should note that I am not suggesting that this form of colonial, romantic approach to ethnic minorities is recent. What I am pointing at is its current, specific iteration within the narrative of "ecological civilization."

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AFTERWORD

The Jury Is Still Out

Robert P. Weller

Abstract

The afterword discusses several cross-cutting questions that the chapters raise. What is the influence of class and urban life on environmental awareness and action? Is there a broader ecological consciousness that extends beyond an urban elite? How much do state constraints and opportunities shape religious possibilities? Is there anything uniquely Asian about the developments documented here? To what extent is religion a driving force in these new forms of awareness? It argues that even though the book offers no definitive answers to these questions, it opens up conversational possibilities that are increasingly important as we think about our collective future.

Keywords: nature; environment; religion; state; Asia

When I first went to Taiwan in the late 1970s to conduct dissertation research on religion, the environment seemed to be nowhere on anyone's agenda. I heard of no environmental protests, noticed no complaints about Taipei's grossly polluted air, saw no nature tourism, and found no media devoted to the natural world. Just a decade later, however, it felt like everything had changed. A newly emerged environmental movement had led to numerous protests, bookstores stocked piles of nature magazines, and the island suddenly hosted four brand new national parks and dozens of private nature tourism sites. Now, almost half a century after my first trips to Asia, we can see all kinds of fundamental changes in attitudes toward the environment across the region, and it is clear that my experience in Taiwan revealed just one very local variant of a phenomenon of widespread significance, which has continued to grow and evolve over the past few decades. The essays collected in *Religion and Environmental Crisis: Spiritual Responses from Asia* offer a welcome look at the scale and scope of some of these changes across the continent.

The book offers fresh insights that touch on a series of crucial questions about the possibilities of environmental change, and about how those potentials intertwine with religious ideas—broadly defined by the editors as the ways that people engage with "non-worldly powers transcending the limits of sectional interests and the particularities of place." Let me briefly touch on what I think are some of the key questions that these essays address.

1. *What is the influence of class and of urban life?* To what extent are environmental movements the product of an urban elite rather than the extensions of a much broader change in consciousness? The evidence on this from around the world is quite mixed, with some arguing that urban intellectual leadership may lead to little direct impact on the ground, while others see a much broader base. Several of the essays collected here—but by no means all of them—show clear evidence of urban elite leadership that may have few broader effects. Münster, for instance, in his study of various yogic versions of agroecological alternatives in India, concludes that "Spiritual leaders who take on issues of the environment and soil care as part of their social outreach programs have hardly any impact on the ground and may, in fact, contribute to greenwashing in the agricultural sector." In another case from India, the EcoSikh movement that Kvanneid documents seems to revolve primarily around highly educated people, and in many cases relies on the wives of well-off men. In another case, Baviskar's study of the native ("desi") cow milk industry concludes that "while they used organic inputs, desi cow dairies remained milk monocultures unintegrated into local ecological loops. In addition, their high-end boutique business model could not be adopted by the vast majority of farmers who supplied the national milk grid." Although all these examples come from India, this kind of phenomenon is far more widespread, and is consistent with what I found when I first examined Taiwan's burgeoning environmentalism in the late 1980s and beyond (Weller 2006).

2. *Is there a broader ecological consciousness?* As a group, however, the essays here suggest that the model of an environmental movement as a kind of elite NGO is far from the only possibility. The essay by Wellens and Hansen on a deity called the Divine Farmer (Shennong) in Taiwan makes the clearest argument for a truly broad-based change in ecological awareness, and they make a compelling case that there has been significant change since my own early observations decades ago. There is of course still some repurposing of local religion by intellectuals, but the overall case here is compelling in the way that we can see these popular changes most clearly by moving beyond the standard NGO model, in this case toward the social and cultural organization of popular temples. Theirs might be the clearest example, but others point at least partially in the same direction. At least some of the groups Münster discusses seem aimed at broad-based ontological changes, although their broader reach is unclear. Qian, Liu and Svarverud's study of a Chinese eco-village, as another example, suggests that there was a kind of demonstration effect that altered the farming practices of at least some of the original villagers, although they also document some tensions between the two groups. Lu Rots's study of Hòa Hảo's attempts to limit plastic waste in Vietnam shows how little effect the campaign had on the religious behavior of many of its own members, but

comparing it to the similar efforts of the Taiwanese Buddhist group Tzu Chi's work on the global promotion of recycling suggests that it may indeed be possible to alter the behavior of large numbers of followers through such campaigns.

3. *How much do state constraints and opportunities shape religious possibilities?* Nearly all of the chapters in this book make clear just how important an effect state policies have on ecological possibilities, even those that work primarily through religious networks and concepts. Most of the states studied here have strong nationalist agendas and significant limits on the possibilities of an independent civil society. Borrowing loosely from the Buddhist idea of merit-making as a way of accruing better karma, we might see this as a need for political merit-making (Weller, Huang, and Wu 2017). This need leads to several kinds of consequences. One is an emphasis on changing individual selves but avoiding organized social actions, which meshes with the kinds of neoliberal individualism that most of these states support, and at the same time avoids organized protests and other forms of social organization that may clash with the state's levels of tolerance. This might explain, for instance, the emphasis on the individual heart-mind (*xin*) in the Chinese eco-village that Qian, Liu and Svarverud document. A second consequence is to channel environmental movements only into areas that the state considers safe, like plastic waste reduction in Vietnam, where Lu Rots shows how Hòa Hảo commitment to the campaign rises and falls exactly with state policy. The EcoSikh movement similarly promotes both an emphasis on the individual as the main target of change and on a very quiet and "pragmatic" environmentalism, in the context of a state that has limited tolerance for protest and limited space of activism for religious minorities like Sikhs. Tzu Chi had always promoted the individual as its fundamental target, and had always avoided confrontational environmental politics, perhaps partly as an adaption to the authoritarian regime in Taiwan in its early years. We can see this continue as they enter China, in Chen and Li's essay, and the trend becomes even more clear there as the nominally Buddhist group tends to avoid religious topics and to emphasize areas that are already state priorities, like recycling but not vegetarianism. Nielsen and Gokhale's Catholic case from Goa, which focuses on another religious minority in India, once again shows how very cautious the religious establishment has had to be, moving away from many kinds of activism, and lending real but only passive support to the agroecological movement there.

4. *What is Asian here?* Prasenjit Duara's *The Crisis of Global Modernity* is a touchstone for several of the contributions collected here (Duara 2015). In that important book, he partly echoes Lynn White's brief polemic, published well over half a century ago, blaming Christianity (and Abrahamic monotheism more broadly) for helping foment an ecological crisis by thoroughly separating God from nature

(White 1967). Following a partly similar logic, Duara suggests that Asian traditions might offer a more hopeful path forward. He writes, for example: "I distinguish two traditions of transcendence in Eurasia: radical transcendence mostly associated with an absolute notion of the creator God and the more dialogical religious traditions, where transcendence is interwoven with immanent, polytheistic, pantheistic and plural religious practices" (Duara 2015, 14). This line of analysis leads him to suggest that it might "be time for us to revisit the alternative traditions from China and India, many strains of which have adapted to the unceasing circulations of modernity, to examine whether they allow a more viable cosmological foundation for sustainability" (Duara 2015, 2). How much evidence do the chapters of this book give to support his case? As I read them, the jury is still very much out. A few of the cases have strong roots in local Asian traditions. This is most obvious for some of the chapters on Hindu ideas of purity (like the desi cows in Baviskar's chapter), or about the nature of soil (Münster). The Taiwanese Divine Farmer temples also show very strong roots in local tradition (Wellens and Hansen). On the other hand, however, the sets of activities these groups undertake across the region—soil conservation and ecological farming, plastic waste reduction, recycling, and so on—do not seem very fundamentally different from each other or from what we might see in other parts of the world. Nor does the one Catholic case seem particularly different from the more local traditions. Perhaps no one has yet been able to mobilize the appropriate Asian religious resources in ways that Duara would like to see, but that is also a reminder that there are important structural reasons that make it difficult to do so. In any case, the question certainly deserves further exploration.

5. *What is the influence of religion?* There is no doubt that religions offer ways of influencing environmental attitudes and behaviors that the more usual focus on secular NGOs misses. That observation still leaves open the question of whether specific religious theologies, cosmologies, and ontologies really matter, or if instead religions are just becoming post hoc vehicles to carry environmental messages that developed elsewhere. One way of approaching this is to ask how much we can identify unique characteristics of each religious tradition as it addresses the environment; the alternative would suggest a finding that all religions are really promoting very similar goals. At least on the surface, many of the case studies here suggest that there are few characteristics that clearly originate in religious ideas. There is the emphasis on purity in some of the Indian cases, but even that reflects in part a particular state nationalist project of the moment. Much of what is central to the religious projects discussed here seems to bear a broad family resemblance to other ecological movements elsewhere, including secular ones. These include, for instance, Tzu Chi's emphasis on recycling in China, the Hòa Hảo campaigns to reduce plastic waste, the Catholic passive support for agroecology in Goa, and the

"pragmatic environmentalism" of EcoSikh. Perhaps Taiwan's Divine Farmer temples offer a partial exception, where the mobilizational capacity of local temples and the ability for deities to communicate directly through spirit mediums has sometimes been crucial in environmental protest. An even clearer case of a true alternative to dominant, secular, global ecological paradigms appears especially in Bäckström's study of the Blang ethnic group located in China's far southwest. In this entire collection, only the Blang really represent a group with few earlier ties to the great global and state religions of Asia. Originally living by slash and burn agriculture, the Blang have retained some older ideas of a "theogenic" world characterized by a fully relational understanding of humans' place in the world—one that does not separate a natural from a human world of what Bäckström calls "manufacture." On the one hand, his essay seems to offer the greatest hope for a genuinely different approach to ecological problems. On the other hand, the Blang themselves seem to retain little hope that they can fight against a system that has systematically cut off their earlier way of life.

Like any book that aims to advance our understanding, this one does not offer any simple answers to the questions I have asked, or to the many other possible questions one could pose. Instead, it enriches our thinking and challenges our assumptions. It does not let us take for granted so many things that much writing on ecological problems seems to assume, and it offers us new directions as we try to imagine and organize our way past current dilemmas. There is no easy environmentalism here that we can simply adopt or adapt—no simple Buddhist or Hindu or Blang or any other answer. Instead, these essays offer us something that should prove more useful: an opening up of conversational possibilities as we think about our collective future.

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