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Environmental philosophy in Asia: Between eco-orientalism and ecological nationalisms

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Environmental Philosophy in Asia: Between Eco-Orientalism and Ecological Nationalisms

Abstract

Environmental philosophy–broadly conceived as using philosophical tools to develop ideas related to environmental issues–is conducted and practiced in highly diverse ways in different contexts and traditions in Asia. "Asian environmental philosophy" can be understood to include Asian traditions of thought as well as grassroots perspectives on environmental issues in Asia. Environmental issues have sensitive political facets tied to who has the legitimacy to decide about how natural resources are used. Because of this, the works, practices, and researchers in Asian environmental philosophy are exposed to being (mis)used by diverse stakeholders and actors to support political ends not related to environmental sustainability. Two processes are at play at the nexus of the construction of identities in relation to conceptualizations of nature: eco-orientalism and ecological nationalisms. This paper analyzes and exemplifies these dynamics through a conceptual framework that distinguishes ideological and socio-technical explanations of environmental degradation. Finally, to minimize the risks of political misuse, five pathways are presented to carefully help curate environmental, philosophical statements: contextualize, quantify uncertainty and "uniqueness," downscale, confront claims with local realities and literature, and collaborate with researchers from other disciplines. Conjointly, these pathways aim at favoring intercultural collaboration while valuing diversity, thus supporting the development and exchanges in environmental philosophy in Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Environmental philosophy; Eco-orientalism; Orientalism; Exoticism; Ecological nationalism; Asian philosophy; Eco-dogmatism; Nationalism

1. Introduction

Environmental philosophy—broadly conceived as using philosophical tools to develop ideas related to environmental issues—is conducted and practiced in highly diverse ways in different contexts and traditions in Asia.[1] In this paper, we understand "Asian environmental philosophy" as including Asian traditions of thought as well as grassroots perspectives on environmental issues in Asia.[2] We focus on how these traditions are practiced nowadays in Asia and on the worldviews of the local stakeholders engaged in grassroots environmental movements in Asia rather than on how these traditions are portrayed and "exploited" (Larson, 1987: 157) by thinkers who do not directly work within a contemporary Asian geographical sociocultural context (Rolston, 1987).

Researchers in environmental philosophy in Asia face a variety of challenges[3] and opportunities, including state censorship, pressure and support from religious groups, issues related to indigenous and social movements, restricted access to resources such as libraries, and language barriers (Droz et al., 2022). As one sordid illustration of the seriousness of some of these challenges, the Philippines is among the leading countries in the world in terms of the number of environmentalists killed (Holden, 2022). Thinkers navigate thorny contexts while writing and discussing environmental philosophical ideas. The sensitivity of these social, political, cultural, and religious contexts tends to be underestimated by international scholars when considering the role of Asian environmental philosophies in a global context.

Environmental issues are closely related to land rights and resource use and ownership, which are sensitive political issues, as they are prone to conflicts (de Jong et al., 2021). Practicing and discussing

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[2] "Asia" here is conceived as primarily focusing on the subregions classified as "Southern Asia," "South-Eastern Asia," and "Eastern Asia" in the United Nations geoscheme for Asia, used by the United Nations and maintained by the United Nations Statistics Division. See: "Glossary of Environment Statistics," Department of Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, Statistics Division, (ST/ESA/STAT/SER.F/67), United Nations, New York, 1997. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/SeriesF/SeriesF_67E.pdf, last accessed on October 22, 2023).

[3] These challenges and opportunities emerged from discussions during the 2022 Online Symposium of the Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy.

environmental philosophy without taking a stance that could be (mis-) interpreted in a way that could threaten the reputation or safety of the researcher is a complex and delicate endeavor. Due to this political aspect closely tied to environmental issues, different tendencies can be observed in the practice and perception of Asian environmental philosophy, such as ecological nationalisms, eco-orientalism, and processes of auto-orientalizations. Works, whether scholarly or literary, affected by these tendencies are at risk of being misused by some stakeholders and political actors for ends not related to environmental sustainability, for instance, to attempt to mistakenly justify hatred and discrimination towards some communities. These tendencies also hinder collaboration between scholars and thinkers by creating groups that claim ownership over some specific ideas and assign blame to other groups that are identified with other negative ideas and practices.

At the beginning of 2022, a Call for Papers by the *Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy* was widely circulated online for abstracts for individual presentations, panels, and workshop proposals on the theme "Diversity of Environmental Philosophies in Asia." The first Online Symposium of the *Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy* took place on June 17-18, 2022.[4] More than 120 people registered to join the symposium (although not everyone joined the conversation), and about 20 scholars and activists presented their work related to more than 12 countries in Asia, from Japan to India. During these two days, we were confronted with the entanglement of cultural conceptions, religious beliefs, traditional practices, and representations of environmental degradation. Two workshops—on the meanings of "nature" and on nationalism in environmental philosophy in Asia—and several presentations gave us the opportunity to engage this issue. Discussions reflected that diverse interest groups propose divergent explanations and solutions to the environmental crisis and sometimes resort to rhetorical patterns that bind the identity of a specific group to a particular view of nature. Environmental philosophy risks getting caught up in the games of nationalism and being used to push religious or political agendas. In addition, "Asian" environmental philosophies are exposed to eco-orientalism and auto-orientalization tropes, as described below.

This paper represents the output of a working group on the theme of ecological nationalisms that was born from this symposium. Participants interested in the theme were invited to join the working group. They participated in a series of online meetings, exchanges of sources and ideas, and worked on a common draft

[4] For more, see https://asiaenviphilo.com/naep-online-symposium/, last accessed on January 18, 2024.

between and after meetings that took place on July 14th, 2022 (discussion of the scope and subject), January 23rd, 2023 (discussion of the conceptual framework) and February 16th, 2023 (discussion of the first draft and of the pathways), as well as a series of smaller online meetings throughout 2023 and 2024 to finalize and revise the manuscript.

This paper critically discusses the tendencies that bind environmental discourses to identity and proposes some pathways to enable and foster collaboration between researchers from different backgrounds while taking into consideration the political sensitivity of the contexts in which each has to safely live. We critically describe and analyze the processes of ecological nationalism and eco-orientalism with the hope that this analysis will help unleash the potential of intercultural collaboration while valuing diversity. We aim to explore how researchers in the field of Asian environmental philosophy–broadly conceived as described above–can participate in the elaboration of environmental philosophies that are rooted in local sociopolitical contexts and tied to cultural identities while avoiding vilifying and essentialist rhetoric. As such, this paper targets the taken-for-grantedness of this rhetoric in some environmental, philosophical statements and encourages more problematizing. We provide some pathways to avoid a framing of environmental philosophical discourses in terms of identity, such as to contextualize statements, as discussed below. We invite the reader to join us in bringing nuances to ecological nationalistic or eco-orientalist narratives and improve intercultural collaboration. First, we propose a conceptual framework that aims to bring more clarity to the above-mentioned intertwined tendencies, which we illustrate with examples. Second, we identify a series of optional pathways for researchers working in or about environmental philosophies in Asia.

Notably, the dynamics analyzed, and the options suggested in this paper are not limited to the case of Asia but can be found and applied elsewhere. Thus, despite the fact that, in this paper, we focus on our experience as a team of researchers that met through a common interest or work in the specific case of environmental philosophies in Asia, the challenges, considerations, and pathways presented could be of interest to researchers who do not have any direct link to Asian environmental philosophies. Along this line, we use the concept of eco-orientalism as an analytical tool not limited to "East-West" dynamics but instead covering more broadly processes of idealization or vilification between "we" and "them"—or self-other—which can be at play in other pairs of opposed concepts such as urban versus indigenous.

As this paper focuses on our experience as practitioners of environmental philosophy in Asia, we

choose to keep the concept of eco-orientalism as a keyword instead of using other overlapping wordings such as ecological exoticism or idealization, glorification, or vilification of the other. Similarly, we refer to "nationalism" not exclusively in relation to a sovereign nation-state but more broadly as including ideologies that emphasize belonging and allegiance to a specific group and hold that these obligations outweigh those of other groups or individual interests.

2. Conceptual Framework

A rhetoric that binds conceptualizations of nature to sociopolitical identity pervades research (e.g., in the sciences and humanities) (Adams and Mulligan, 2002), environmental management and policymaking (Southwold Llewellyn, 2014), and education (Chawla and Cushing, 2007), at different scales. Here, we explore different facets of this rhetoric, illustrate them with examples, and propose a conceptual framework to help clarify the complex dynamics at play.

2.1. Nature As a Proxy for Identity

Nature itself, or the relationship of human beings—more often, of a specific group of human beings—to "nature" and environmental sustainability is sometimes used as a proxy for cultural identity. In other words, one's conceptualization of nature can be used to represent the values of one's group, as well as the superiority or inferiority of one's group in comparison with other groups. Representations and conceptualizations of "nature" tend to mirror the representation of one's self or group-identity in an inseparable way. Along this line, land can be seen as a "sentient and active" partner to identify with, "a social mirror that acts as an equal partner in the human-environmental dialectic" (Strang, 2005: 46). Further, it is often hard to disentangle what people "think about the natural world, about plants and animals, from what they think about themselves" (Aris M., 1990: 99). We cannot think "nature" without thinking humans, and we cannot think humans without thinking about nature and the world. Specifically, the research highlighted two recurrent aspects in the conceptualizations of "nature" in East and Southeast Asia (Droz et al. 2022): (1) considerations related to the origin, emergence, and existence of things in the world along with connotations of spontaneity (such as in the Japanese concept of "*jinen*" (Terao, 2002)); (2) observations regarding the relations between different worlds and the place of humans among these different worlds, such as the world of gods, the material world and the

world of animals.[5] In addition, conceptions of "nature" have been transformed throughout historical phases as various communities in Asia encountered different cultures and worldviews through colonization, European modernity/imperialism, migration, nationalist rhetoric and projects, and so forth (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

In this sense, many environmental philosophies are associated with a specific geographical, cultural, or linguistic group, such as "Asian" environmental philosophies. They would benefit by addressing the positionality of the "we," not only in relation to "Nature" but also regarding "the other," as shown in Figure 1. Some authors and leaders resort to essentialist arguments to legitimize the positionality of their group. Accordingly, a set of characteristics is necessarily attributed to an identity, which can be cultural, ethnic, or something else. For instance, an essentialist narrative could claim that it is "in the essence" of "Asian people" to "live in harmony with nature." This line of reasoning rests on (1) a homogenization within the group (e.g., all "Asians" need to fit this characteristic in order to be considered "Asian," otherwise, they might be considered "corrupted" or "impure") and on (2) contrast with the other, who does not fit these characteristics (e.g., "western people who destroy nature").

Similar arguments that replace "Asian" with "Indigenous" or "people" with "culture" are not uncommon in sustainability sciences and humanities. Along this line, Berkes distinguishes three myths in portrayals of the relation between traditional people and nature: the "exotic other" who is often a "noble savage" living in harmony with nature; the ignorant and limited intruder who spoils pristine ecosystems; and the "fallen angel" who became a threat to their own natural paradise due to being corrupted by external influences (Berkes, 2008: 226).

In environmental policymaking, such rhetoric is sometimes used to silence opposition. Indeed, once a policy or practice is associated with the essence of what it is to be a member of a group (be it cultural, ethnic, national, etc.), resistance and opposition to these policies or practices amounts to rebellion against the group, which might lead to rejection from the group. Similarly, the portrayal of minority representatives as "exceptional" could not only divorce them from "their group" and lead to feelings of "minority betrayal," but it could also reinforce perceived boundaries between social groups (Severs and Jong, 2018).

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[5] For instance, Batak cosmology analysed with regard to environmental ethics, has been shown to be articulated around structural distinctions between the upper-world, middle-world, and under-world and their interrelations. See, Hesron H. Sihombing, "Trees, Economics, and Sustainability: An Iconic Materialist Reading of Batak Cosmology," Paper presented on June 18th, 2022, at the Online Symposium of the Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy (June 17-18, 2022). See also references to the word for "nature" in Burmese and Nepali in Droz et al. (2022).

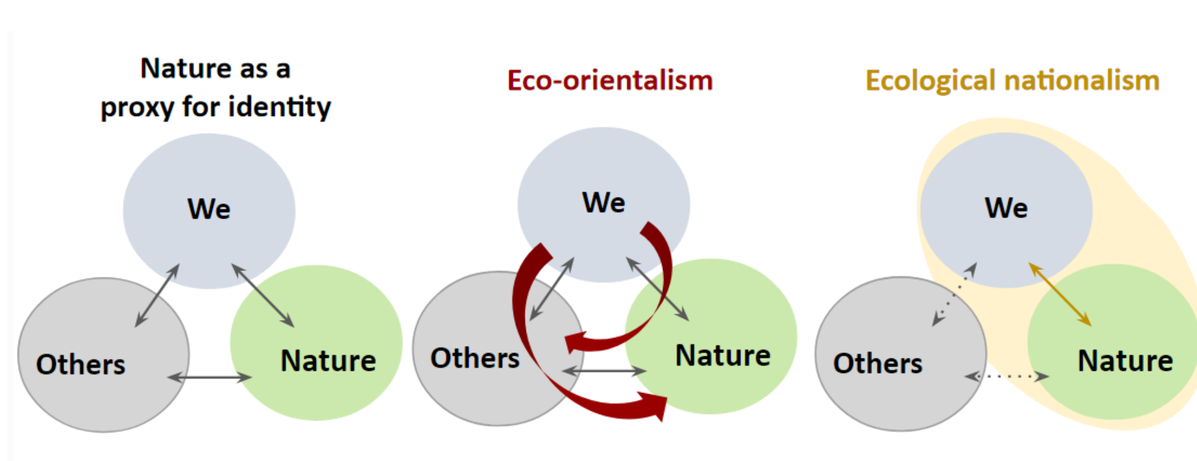
Two types of processes are at play at this nexus of the construction of identities in relation to conceptualizations of nature:

(1) eco-orientalism (outward process, in the sense it constructs the "we" by comparing it to an external "other" associated with "exotic" natural environments), and

(2) ecological nationalisms (inward process, in that these dynamics generally unfold within a group ("we") in relation to the local natural environment).

In the practice of environmental philosophies in Asia, ecological nationalisms and eco-orientalism often go hand-in-hand. Eco-Orientalism here is understood as not being limited to "East-West" dynamics but rather as applying more broadly to self-other portrayals that elevate one side of the dichotomy while denigrating the other (Gabriel and Wilson, 2021). And while eco-orientalism works as a centrifugal force to alienate 'others' from 'we,' ecological nationalism works as a centripetal force to homogenize in-group diversity into a monolithic 'we.' As we will see, while these two processes can be mutually reinforcing both in explanations for environmental degradations and in political claims regarding identity and legitimacy, they can also sometimes be found in isolation.

Figure 1: "We" in relation to Nature and Others. The two red arrows represent eco-orientalism; outward-looking dynamics that construct the identity of the "we" by comparison with an "Other" associated with exotic natural environments. The circle and arrow in yellow capture ecological nationalism and its dynamics largely contained within a group in relation to their environment (inward-looking).



2.2. Eco-Orientalism

The critique of the limits of a perspective sometimes leads to a quest for alternatives elsewhere, in the distant past or future, in other cultures, or in other geographical ranges. Similarly, people have been looking for explanations for and solutions to environmental degradation in a golden past (Powers, 2021), in a fictional future of rapid urbanization (Bodin, 2017: 357), in non-mainstream ideologies and practices (Holmgren, 2004), as well as in foreign cultures (Chakroun, 2019; Thompson and Thompson, 2018) and religions (Okoye, 2012; Parkes, 1997). In other words, what "we" know best (our culture, practices, religion, technologies, etc.) has failed to bring us a flourishing yet sustainable society; hence we shall look for solutions outside. This "elsewhere" can be either idealized or vilified through contrasting it and opposing it to what "we" are most familiar with.

Imposing one's own cultural assumptions, concepts, and framings in interpreting others' practices, words, and ideas is a phenomenon well-known by anthropologists and translators (Castro, 2015). Most famously, this echoes the concept of orientalism, which was developed by Edward Said in his homonymous book published in 1978 (Said, 1979). Said used the term 'orientalism' to critically refer to the Eurocentric tendency of some scholars to objectify the "Orient." It also highlights that when we discuss about the *other,* as well as when we discuss about *ourselves* compared to the *other*, our discourse takes place in a context that tends to frame our own representations and thoughts. This phenomenon impacts many aspects of human society, including, as Said explained, scholarship. Thus, "orientalism" tends to influence both our representation of the *other* and of *ourselves*. This influence can be perceived as an invitation towards the encounter of the *other*, but it also risks normalizing skewed or distorted representations of the other. At worst, curiosity leads to misunderstandings and misleading, discriminatory ideological statements and views. In the academic literature, this reflects the tendency to discriminate, for instance, against cultures outside the "Western" area of influence. In the field of philosophy specifically, orientalist tendencies lead to shortcomings in addressing biases and overgeneralizations in writings about *other* cultures and thoughts (Dastur, 2018; Hobson, 2004).

Ecological orientalism refers to orientalist tendencies in approaches to environmental degradation. Eco-orientalism is understood broadly as encompassing self-other dynamics beyond the specific east-west

case. Eco-orientalism can affect narratives regarding (1) the explanations for, (2) the solutions to, and (3) the effects of current or ongoing environmental degradation. Often, narratives concerning these three aspects are intertwined, not always easily distinguishable, and mutually supporting each other (Hoffmann, 2018). In Asian environmental philosophies, the overarching "positive" eco-orientalist discourse that is primarily centered on an explanation for the environmental crisis reads along the lines: "Asians (or people from a specific nation, ethnicity, etc.), thanks to their essence or culture, have better ideas about their relation to nature and live in harmony with nature." More concretely, attempts to unveil potential solutions to the environmental issues sometimes argue that these are to be found in "Asian cultures and societies" as they include material and technical traditions that produce less environmental degradation than those that are associated with "Western" culture and societies. A twin "negative" eco-orientalist argument pervades some attitudes and discourses both by "Asian" and external actors[6] and argues along the lines that "Asia should follow the lead of Western nature conservation since the West offers better practices, political system, technology, and sciences." Yet, groups can be inspired by, adapt, and adopt environmentally sustainable practices from "other" cultures without associating them with cultural essentialism. On the contrary, refraining from romanticizing or vilifying a culture or a group, as well as critically examining and contextualizing the issue at stake is essential to transparently assess the strengths and shortcomings of a sustainable practice.

Referring to eco-orientalist arguments that provide explanations for the effects of current or ongoing environmental degradation, Tori Bush defines eco-orientalism as "a public discourse which separates or disconnects people and places vulnerable to global warming and its rising seas through stereotypical or othering representations in writing, rhetoric, and media" (Bush, 2022). In her interpretation, eco-orientalism utilizes representations that categorize and locate "peripheral" spaces as the *other* to mitigate material changes. If environmental changes affect others (and/or are caused by others), then there is no need to change "our" practices and views. This highlights the plasticity of eco-orientalist discourses, in which the composition of the "we" and of "the other" tends to swiftly change for the sake of the argument. Far from being limited to over-generalized comparisons between "the West" and "the East/Asia" (whoever is included in each of these categories), ecological orientalist dynamics can take more specific denominations ("my country," "my

[6] For instance: "EU urges Asia to cut carbon emissions," The Irish Times, May 29, 2017 (URL: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/eu-urges-asia-to-cut-emissions-1.807553, last accessed on April 13, 2023).

culture," "my tribe," etc.) depending on the context. Yet, a recurrent aspect is that one side of the "we-they" binome is positively idealized, while the other tends to be negatively represented and blamed.

In the case of writings in environmental humanities originating from North America and Europe, a trend is to vilify the "we" who is portrayed as the source of environmental harm (e.g., "western" sciences, countries, economies) (Kidner, 2014; Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun, 2021) and to idealize the other, who is represented as a haven of solutions innocently victimized (e.g., "Indigenous people," "Asian cultures,"(Thompson and Thompson, 2018) etc.). In recent years, environmental humanities have explored Asian traditions to search for solutions to address the "Western" problem that allegedly caused the environmental crisis (Bergthaller, 2020). This overgeneralized Manichean-leaning rhetoric also pervades environmental governance discourses by international organizations around the world, in a way that could be associated with a form of eco-dogmatism (Droz, 2023). For instance, the highly diverse ways of life of "Indigenous and local communities"—a denomination deliberately kept ambiguous—tend to be romanticized without distinction as exemplary ways of "living in harmony with nature," which are threatened by yet another conflation, "westernization," "industrialization," and "colonization" (Domínguez and Luoma, 2020; Posey, 2004).

Sometimes, discourses in Asia present the reverse dynamic, namely, the glorification of "the West" and the idealization of "Western" ideas, sciences, or even nature. The tendency, in Asia, to negatively represent "Asia"—or any subcategories—is affected by the histories of colonization, imperialism, and neocolonialism and could be seen as a form of self-alienation. These histories are context-specific and resist generalizations in terms of east-west dynamics (Souyri, 2016) as they include conflicts and power dynamics internal to Asia. These (auto-)orientalist tensions in representations of nature are sometimes made visible in visual and literary arts. Some Japanese animation movies have been described as mixing orientalism and occidentalism to create imaginary worlds (Ohsawa, 2019). For instance, in his early work, the Japanese animation creator Hayao Miyazaki depicts fantasy natural worlds in which the landscapes of the European Alps are romanticized (e.g., *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*, 1974). At the time, Hayao Miyazaki disliked Japanese landscapes because they reminded him of Japan's undemocratic society, as well as Japanese military brutality and colonialism in East Asia (Miyazaki, 1996). As a result, he projected his utopian ideals onto European natural landscapes and refrained from appreciating the Japanese natural environment.

Environmental policymaking can also be affected by the idealization of the other**.** For instance, in Taiwan, major environmental organizations embrace ecological views originally developed in Europe or North America as the guideline and model to follow (Weller and Hsin-Huang, 1998). The organizations' leaders idealize Western environmentalism in constructing their environmental philosophy and advocating practical solutions to ecological destruction. They position the development of Taiwan's environmental organizations as evolutionarily moving towards the historical path their Western counterparts have taken long before.

Eco-orientalist discourses are sometimes re-appropriated by the representatives of the communities who are supposed to hold ancestral solutions to our contemporary problems. Economic interests in the politics of developmental aid can motivate this re-appropriation of eco-orientalist rhetoric (Novellino, 2003). These processes, common in Chinese and Japanese political discourses on environmental issues, could be qualified as "auto-orientalisation" (Heurtebise, 2017) or even as reflecting "auto-eco-orientalism." In these cases, processes of "auto-eco-orientalism" segue into ecological nationalisms —which will be discussed in depth later—with the former mutually reinforcing the latter. For instance, in China, the concept of Ecological civilization (生态文明 *shēngtài wénmíng*) was promoted by Hu Jintao at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. In 2017 only, over 4000 articles and books and more than 170,000 articles containing the keyword have been published in mainstream press-media (Heurtebise 2017: 17). In this sense, eco-orientalist rhetoric is used by politicians both domestically and internationally as a tool for curating the international reputation of one's culture or country (Gaffric and Heurtebise, 2013).

More generally, representatives of the "exotic" group can reappropriate discourses of ecological orientalism, for instance by framing their ideas and stories in ways expected by the other. This common strategy in marketing for international tourism (Han, 2006) is also mobilized in environmental politics, for instance, when some representatives from Indigenous groups adopt a rhetoric of ecological exoticism to appeal to and get support from international conservation organizations (Dove et al., 2003). The United Nations "Satoyama Initiative"[7] represents a key example of how these eco-orientalist discourses from the "other" and from the "we" can marry and reinforce each other (Murasawa, 2020). "Satoyama" is a Japanese word

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[7] https://satoyama-initiative.org/ (last accessed on April 13, 2023).

composed of the association of "village" and "mountain" (Chakraborty and Chakraborty, 2017: 38). The word inspired a text called "Satoyama Initiative," which was then re-appropriated by the Japanese government as a positive tool for international soft-power, and finally also for promoting the valorization of landscapes in the countryside domestically.[8]

2.3. Ecological Nationalisms

Eco-orientalism and auto-orientalization are characterized by a reification of differences and an essentialization of identity and culture. "We" and "they" are homogenized, i.e., everyone in the group is the same, and differences and power dynamics within the group are ignored, and essentialized, i.e., the said characteristics are not within the realm of choice; instead, they pertain to the essence of people; as a consequence, who does not fit the criteria is actually not part of "us." This reification and fascination for the extremes resemble what is at play in nationalism (Satha-Anand, 2018). Regarding environmental issues, narratives can merge claims to resources and self-determination with sustainability arguments along the lines of "'we' do better than 'them/you' in our relationship to nature, so we are the most legitimate to control/manage the land/resources."

Widely studied in political ecology and environmental history, ecological nationalisms also affect and shape the development of environmental philosophies. The idea of ecological nationalism builds "on the assumption that manifestations of political visions in nature and the formation of nations are mutually constitutive" (Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan, 2014: 35). Ecological nationalisms refer to "the ways in which varieties of nationalisms are mediated and constructed through reference to the natural" (Hoeppe, 2014: 233). Based on a collection of case studies in South Asia, Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf (2014: 6) write:

> Ecological nationalism, in our usage, refers to a condition where both cosmopolitan and nativist versions of nature devotion converge and express themselves as a form of nation-pride in order to become part of processes legitimizing and consolidating a nation. This concept of ecological nationalism links cultural and political aspirations with programs of nature conservation or environmental protection while noting their expression in, and through, a rhetoric of rights that includes civil, human, and intellectual property rights.

[8] For a critical analysis of the potential and limitations of Satoyama research in recent years, see (Murasawa, 2023). For a genesis of satoyama research, see (Chakroun and Droz, 2020; Takeuchi, 2010).

Their approach recognizes the "hybrid nature of identity politics" (ibid.) within environmental politics and activism. Not satisfied with only managing externalities brought by contemporary patterns of production and consumption, ecological nationalisms aim at radical changes in social and political life. Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf distinguish between two views of how ecological nationalism is expressed. First, a "metropolitan-secular view of nature and its economistic and material uses for the nation" (ibid.) attempts to redefine what it means to be a citizen of a specific nation, erases internal diversity, and justifies the forceful management of natural resources in the name of the national good. Second, "Indigenist, or regionalist, reaction to the expansion of the high-modern nation-state in its imperial or post-Independence forms, or to the forces of globalization that intervene from outside the realms of nation-states" (ibid.) is associated with narratives of community belonging and attachment to the local land.

The intimate bond between cultural identity and the local environment serves as a ground to assert sovereignty through claims of human rights to attachment to the place. Nature "remains, from the local to the national and global, a space for manifesting and celebrating political and cultural aspirations and asserting dominance" (Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf 2014: 32-33). Within this rhetoric used by both Nation-States and local Indigenous communities in a quest for self-determination, "Nature and nation are thus re-imagined as mutually constitutive" (Karlsson, 2014: 191).

Environmental degradation and the loss of familiar landscapes and seascapes can also reinforce the attractivity of these discourses. Lost or threatened landscapes and natural elements can become fetishized, be it by the people who live and see their environment surroundings becoming unrecognizable through tourism, exploitation, or warfare, or by urban activists who do not live in any proximity to the "natural" world, but who enjoy portraying a romantic vision of the landscape. In the context of India, this romantic vision of a lost or threatened natural paradise is often associated with "a strategically essentialist, celebratory indigenism" (Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf 2014: 31). Paradoxically, the nostalgic remembrance of the thriving nature in a golden past can also be associated with policies and initiatives that seek to deeply transform the landscape, instead of conserving it. In other words, "the place gains a special value via its absence" (Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf 2014: 30).

In the Philippines, for example, local government units (LGUs) and citizens sometimes oppose state-sanctioned mining operations, especially when foreign capital is prioritized over the sentiments of the

communities. Local communities acting on matters of resource governance driven by their affinity for their homeland can constitute a form of ecological nationalism. In Indonesia, ecological nationalism appears in the complex tensions between the nationalist rhetoric of multiculturalism and the wealth of natural resources, economic progress, and the rights of local ethnic groups to their lands. The political vision of the advanced Indonesia 2045 overwhelmingly binds together multiculturalism, natural exploitation/preservation, and indigenous rights (Sihombing, 2023). From these examples, the concept of ecological nationalism can be seen as closely related to so-called "resource nationalism."[9]

2.4. Ideological versus Socio-Technical Explanations of Environmental Degradation

In political discourses, explanations and solutions to the environmental crisis are enmeshed in economic interests, identities, and politics. Martin Fricke introduces a useful distinction between ideological and technical explanations of the present environmental degradation. In this expression and throughout this paper, "ideological" is used in its literal sense to mean based on or relating to a system of ideas and ideals. Martin Fricke explains:[10]

> Ideological explanations assert that the environmental degradation in a given place is due to the ideas the people administrating the place have about their relation to the natural world. (...) Technical explanations, by contrast, locate the problem in our ignorance about how to correctly use current technologies (understood in a broad sense where they include 'social technologies') with the help of which we relate to our environment.

A paradigm example for ideological explanations is Lynn White's claim that Christian anthropocentrism is the root of our ecological crisis (White, 1967). Similarly, ideas attributed to 17th-century European modernity, such as nature-culture dualism, are sometimes represented as having contributed to current environmental degradation and are therefore blamed for it (Kureethadam, 2017: 5).[11]

Ideological explanations can be tied to technical explanations, for instance, by arguing that

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[9] According to Childs (Childs, 2016), resource nationalism refers to State-led initiatives to utilize a country's natural resources through economic and political control for national benefits; see also (Chaloping-March, 2014).

[10] Martin Fricke, "Asia as a Counterexample to Ideological Explanations of Environmental Degradation," paper presented on June 17th, 2022, at the Online Symposium of the Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy (June 17-18, 2022).

[11] Ideological explanations are also exemplified by statements such as: "Modern anthropocentrism thus begins with Descartes, with direct and evident ecological consequences" (Kureethadam, 2017).

technological and scientific skills are the consequences of the ideological anthropocentric assumption.[12] However, technical explanations can also be self-sufficient by arguing that the technologies and ways people mobilize to put their ideas into practice are at fault in place of their ideas, desires, philosophies, or worldviews. In this view, certain externalities are regarded as the problem. The techniques people use daily are perceived as having unwanted consequences, such as environmental degradation. Such discourses suggest that even if people's beliefs, intentions, and even worldviews are aligned with conservation, what they do to achieve other needs and desires has the unintended consequence of destroying nature. Thus, the remedy is not necessarily to change people's ideas, philosophy, and religion but rather to find better *means* to fulfill these expectations to better control and develop the usages of techniques to minimize nature's degradation.[13]

The distinction between ideological and socio-technical explanations for environmental degradation can be ambiguous. Indeed, the technical tools we use influence the ways we think about nature, and vice-versa, our conceptualizations of our relation to nature shape the technical solutions we develop. Both ideological and socio-technical explanations take advantage of the distance and blurry mist that separates the concrete environmental changes from ideas and values. In the context of ecological nationalist or eco-orientalist discourses, these ambiguities contribute to erasing the political and power dynamics and portraying abstract, unidentifiable scapegoats and heroes whose deeds cannot be verified and who cannot be held accountable due to the overgeneralizing character of the explanations proposed. Meanwhile, ways to attribute responsibility for accumulated environmental consequences such as climate change to individuals, specific stakeholders, and particular organizations have been developed both in theory and practice (Droz, 2020).

Explanations for and solutions to environmental degradation are two sides of the same coin. The backward-looking side diagnoses the problems and often assigns blame and attributes responsibilities—for instance, to "Western anthropocentrism." The forward-looking side aims to develop and implement solutions. Like the inward-outwards dynamics of ecological nationalism and eco-orientalism, the ideological and socio-

[12] For a critical analysis of the argument that presents anthropocentrism as the cause of the environmental crisis, see (Droz, 2022).

[13] Another example of a socio-technical explanation is the claim that global capitalism brings about environmental degradation. In this argument, capitalism is regarded as a way of organizing the economy, rather than a belief system about our relation to nature. This social technology, it would be claimed, has the unwanted consequence of harming the environment. The harm can be alleviated by organizing our economy in a different way.

technical explanations/solutions to environmental degradation are feeding each other; they are different dimensions of the same phenomena.

Table 1 synthesizes the inward (ecological nationalism) and outward (eco-orientalism) dynamics related to identity and the explanations or solutions to environmental degradation in terms of ideologies versus techniques. The outward dynamics of ecological orientalism are further divided into the negative version that vilifies the exotic other and associates it with the problems and the positive version that idealizes the other as the source of solutions. A standardized example in terms of we-they dynamics is presented for each resulting category. Some categories can be complementary. For instance, an ecological nationalist can justify their community's sovereignty thanks to ideological explanations and complement their argument with a negative representation of the other as the source of environmental degradation. If the other is also engaging in outward positive ecological orientalism (that is, an idealization of the "exotic" culture), their discourses can contribute to reinforcing the ecological nationalist standpoint.

Table 1. *Ecological nationalism and ecological orientalism contrasted with explanations and solutions to environmental degradation. Phrasings in this table are simplified examples of rhetoric that do not represent the position(s) of the authors.*

Identity→ & politics→ Explanations /Solutions ↓↓	**Inward Ecological nationalism** Justifying the State/the community's sovereignty	**Outward - Ecological orientalism**	
		Negative - Vilification Problems	Positive - Idealization Solutions
Ideological	We have lived in harmony with nature since immemorial times because we **understand** and know how to **respect** it.	The other and its negative influences on our **views** of nature are the source of environmental degradation.	Thanks to their essence or culture, the others have better **ideas** about their relation to nature and thus refrain from destroying it.
Socio-technological	Our traditional **ways of living** in harmony with nature are the solution; let's return to them (and share them with the world).	The other's **techniques and traditions** and our adoption of these are the problem.	Others' cultures and societies include **traditions and techniques** that produce less environmental degradation than ours.

Similar over-simplified patterns of discourses can be found in the field of Asian environmental

philosophy, such as technical explanations of environmental degradation claiming that "Asian culture(s)" comprise technical traditions that produce less environmental degradation than those associated with Western culture(s). A common ideological eco-orientalist argument is that "Asians, thanks to their essence or culture, have better ideas about their relation to nature and therefore do not want to destroy it." Amid this type of generalized statement, it is essential to keep in mind the question of *who gazes upon whom* (Droz, 2023). The equivalent socio-technical explanation that is often mobilized both by ecological nationalists in Asia and by eco-orientalists in the West reads: "Asian culture(s) and societies include traditions that produce less environmental degradation than those associated with Western culture(s)." Conversely, another common narrative is that environmental degradation in Asia is due to the adoption of the "wrong tools" from the West, and therefore, solutions include either returning to lost Asian practices or improving those Western tools such that they lose their nature-destroying characteristics (Bruun, 2003; Bruun and Kalland, 1995). Along this historically romanticized line, sustainable cultural practices are sometimes portrayed as having been "diluted" and forced towards a more "modernized" perspective on environmental matters in response to international dynamics and the colonial and imperial histories of many Asian countries. Meanwhile, as presented in the last section, narratives that glorify technological solutions in place of cultural traditions in environmental policymaking are also common occurrences in Asia. Pragmatically, in place of an oversimplified portrayal of "traditions" or "new technologies," a robust analysis of whether or not given romanticized practices could be sustainable in the long term in today's social, demographic, economic and environmental context would constitute a stronger argument to support evidence-based policymaking.

3. Pathways

Here, we present pathways that, conjointly, may help avoid statements that could fall into the slippery slopes of ecological nationalism and eco-orientalism and instead favor intercultural collaboration while valuing diversity. These pathways target environmental philosophical statements, be they in Asia, in the field of environmental philosophy, or beyond. Given how politically sensitive environmental issues are as they are tied to sovereignty and resource usage, it is crucial to keep in mind that, even if the writer or speaker of these statements does not intend to defend a posture of ecological nationalism or eco-orientalism, their words can be misinterpreted and misused by other actors to justify their own interests. Therefore, these pathways aim to

help speak and write about environmental philosophy in careful ways to minimize the risks of co-optation by other politically interested ends.

a) Contextualize

The first pathway is to contextualize environmental philosophy statements by specifying to which historical, sociological, and geographical context they apply. This effort of contextualization also includes explicitly clarifying who is included in the "we" and in the "they" and refraining from using over-generalized categories such as "Asian" or "the West." Along the lines of the practice in ethnology, including a positionality statement —when it is safe for the author(s) to do so—can contribute to clarifying the "we" by describing the backgrounds of the author(s) that could have influenced the research methods and results. If there needs to be a "they," then identifying what stakeholders are involved as precisely as possible would be constructive. To go beyond the "east-west" dualism, some have suggested using "Asia as a method," that is, "a society in Asia may be inspired by how other Asian societies deal with problems similar to its own" (Chen, 2010: 212). Without limiting the scope of comparison and mutual inspiration to societies in "Asia," comparison between different practices can be helpful insofar as each context's specificities are properly taken into account, which necessitates clarity beyond over-generalizations.

The contemporary dynamics of local politics and social classes –domestically and internationally– also need to be taken into consideration when contextualizing environmental philosophy statements or ideas. Indeed, some environmental philosophy narratives have been perceived as elitist for lacking a firm grasp on the realities faced by grassroots communities. For instance, in North America, the environmental movement has been accused of elitism in terms of composition, ideology, and impact (Morrison and Dunlap, 1986). In the Philippines, the "no single-use plastics" policy implemented by certain institutions in an attempt to contribute to the mitigation of plastic consumption and marine pollution has been criticized along similar lines. Through this policy, plastic water bottles, containers, etc., are prohibited from being brought into the premises of the implementing institution. Yet, for some (Parriaux, 2022; Salamat, 2023; Sussman, 2020), the philosophy behind this type of environmentalism fails to understand the predicament of marginalized communities who have a weaker purchasing capital and are therefore compelled to patronize what is affordable to them, such as products in single-use plastics (Jenks and Obringer, 2020). Identifying who is advocating specific

environmental philosophical statements and in which contexts is crucial in order to ensure that vulnerable voices are heard and included, especially when these discourses are tied to the concrete implementation of environmental policies that could have counterproductive impacts on marginalized communities (Randeria, 2007).

b) Explicitly identify uncertainty and "uniqueness"

Many statements may suffer from ecological nationalist or eco-orientalist interpretations for failing to quantify uncertainty. For example, authors from varied backgrounds adventure into claiming environmental, philosophical statements along the lines that, since immemorial times, a given local or Indigenous community has been using their traditional ecological knowledge to live sustainably in harmony with nature. To make historical claims less prone to cultural essentialist interpretations, it would be helpful to quantify their uncertainty and present them along with relevant evidence.[14] Indeed, these claims raise a plethora of questions that need to be addressed, such as: Against what criteria and indicators was the sustainability of the management assessed? What are the sources of data to back up claims that specific practices were "immemorial"? When unsubstantiated, idealized claims can obstruct robust research, as Posey writes: "romanticists have undermined scientific investigations with simplistic allegations that natives live in harmony with nature" (Posey, 1998: 104). Research on traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) has been wrestling with these epistemological challenges in the middle of highly politicized contexts (Novellino, 2003; Pierotti, 2010). More generally, researchers have been exploring ways to "decolonize methodologies" to critically analyze and include knowledge transmitted or captured through methods such as storytelling and arts (Smith, 2012).

A second pathway is to quantify uncertainty if possible and to explicitly state the hypotheses, methods, theories, and assumptions and confront these with existing evidence from various sources. A claim that is not substantiated by evidence is not scientific but political, socio-culturally situated, and/or ideological and should be treated and presented as such. Broadly, it is crucial to avoid unsubstantiated overgeneralizations regarding a practice or belief within a culture. Similarly, it is necessary to question claims regarding the "uniqueness"

[14] An example of careful characterization of uncertainty can be found in (Xhauflair et al., 2023).

of a practice or belief. Many ecological nationalist claims glorify the uniqueness of a specific culture or practice. In contrast, a pathway towards minimizing ecological nationalist tropes is to cast doubt on statements that claim the "uniqueness" of a culture, both when speaking with pride or shame of one's own culture and when admiring others.' Looking for similarities between practices and ideas instead of differences, while, of course, acknowledging diversity, is essential to avoid exoticism.

c) Downscale

Another pathway is to downscale the statement, namely, to "de-generalize" it. Especially when it comes to environmental issues, most concrete actions that can be taken and make a difference depend on the local socio-ecological context. It is thus pragmatically useful to bring back the problem to a scale where it can be addressed, which could allow the identification of stakeholders and inspire concrete pro-environmental actions (Brugnach et al., 2017; Klütsch and Ferreira, 2021).

Downscaling could also contribute to minimizing the emergence of emotions such as eco-anxiety and ecological grief (Kałwak and Weihgold, 2022). Feeling overwhelmed or despaired by a situation far bigger than one's scale of action –or represented as such through overgeneralized narratives– could deter from taking environmental actions. Recent research has shown that ecological anxiety and grief related to the urgency and severity of the multi-layered environmental crisis have been growing, especially among specific social groups such as youth (Goldman, 2022; Marks et al., 2021; Thompson, 2021). Environmental psychology has also shown that, in order to lead to pro-environmental actions, concern regarding environmental issues needs to be associated with the belief that the situation is somehow controllable and hope that one's actions can make a difference (Di Fabio and Rosen, 2020; Ojala et al., 2021; Scopelliti et al., 2018).

From a pragmatic perspective regarding both the scale of actions and the emotional impacts, it would be helpful to downscale environmental philosophical statements, contextualize them in their specific sociopolitical, geographical, and historical situations, and identify stakeholders as well as the positionality of the researcher. Environmental philosophy can give a diversified toolbox to individuals and communities to support them in weaving a meaningful thread between their individual lives and the overarching story of their world. To explicitly narrate and draw this link between the individual or communitarian scope of actions and

the wider multi-scaled socio-ecological systems is fundamental to sustaining engagement in pro-environmental actions in the long term (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2016).

d) Confront claims with local realities and literature

Discrepancies between ecological nationalist and eco-orientalist claims and the local realities are a pivotal issue that renders claims problematic and misleading. To minimize this risk, confronting one's projections, theories, and beliefs with the realities on the ground is essential. Yet, pragmatically, it is not possible for all researchers and practitioners to spend long periods of time in fieldworks. Nevertheless, a minimal step for researchers would be to confront their beliefs with research that has already been conducted, especially with local sources. A crucial pathway here is to work multilingually and to synthesize knowledge produced in different languages. Literature reviews need to focus on the local and regional languages relevant to the study area. An ecological nationalist and eco-orientalist rhetoric flourishes within echo chambers or "epistemic bubbles," (Nguyen, 2020) similar to how climate change denial discourses spread in echo chambers in online media (Walter et al., 2017) and social media (Williams et al., 2015). It is crucial to look beyond these epistemic bubbles, and the first step to do so is to conduct interdisciplinary literature reviews from the language and sociocultural contexts of the case study. Pathways to bridge the linguistic barriers in sciences, specifically at biodiversity science-policy interfaces, are increasingly being discussed and experimented with (Droz et al., 2023), including machine translation tools (Steigerwald et al., 2022).

Knowledge brokers play an essential and necessary role in this process, be they translators, interdisciplinary researchers, or researchers who work between cultural and linguistic epistemic bubbles (Colavito et al., 2019). Yet, the knowledge they share and produce is not neutral (Brugnach and Özerol, 2019). They are making choices that are political. Therefore, relying exclusively on them represents a limitation that needs to be explicitly acknowledged in the practice of environmental philosophies, especially regarding cultures or groups to which the researchers do not belong. More generally, when multilingual literature reviews and confrontation of the results with local experts and knowledge brokers have not been conducted, authors should explicitly acknowledge this lack as a limitation, namely, that there might be a bias in the paper due to a partial literature review that did not cover the locally produced literature on the case.

e) Collaborate With Researchers From Other Disciplines

A fifth pathway is to engage in collaboration in order to avoid blind spots and contextualize narratives. Environmental philosophy as a discipline is especially prone to work with abstract ideas in decontextualized terms, which exposes it to ecological nationalist and eco-orientalist misunderstandings and (mis-)uses. Collaborating with researchers in environmental philosophy from other cultural contexts can be a first exercise to help shed light on each other's blind spots. Further, collaborations beyond environmental philosophy can be most useful. Humanities, for instance, history, can help contextualize statements in time (Maranan, 2022: 82). Thanks to their methodological rigor, natural sciences such as biology and ecology can provide a backdrop for philosophical discussions of ecological knowledge. Insights from social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology, are also key to situating environmental philosophical statements within social power dynamics (Jasanoff, 2004). Yet, when collaborating with other disciplines and cultural traditions, it is also crucial to keep in mind their own positionality and limitations in the process of knowledge co-production (Hakkarainen et al., 2020). Pluridisciplinary research, or research that draws insights from a broad range of disciplinary domains has become frequent mainly due to the increase of multi-sectoral collaborations as well as the intersectionality of issues that simply cannot be relegated to a specific domain. This type of cooperation paves the way for a broader discourse since ideas are sourced from diverse perspectives (Ranjbaran and Marras, 2011).

Collaboration is also essential because intersectionality[15] is a key characteristic of environmental issues (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Owusu et al., 2019). Originally coined to capture the confluence of multiple social categories into a person's identity (Elaine Muirhead et al., 2020), intersectionality here reflects that environmental issues lie at the intersection and interplay of different social, political, economic, and ecological factors. Therefore, environmental philosophy in Asia and beyond will benefit from intersectional analysis since environmental problems often intersect with gender, religion, class, race, sexuality, immigration, disability, and other dimensions. Intersectionalizing Asian environmental philosophy involves examining these dimensions as they overlap with ecological issues. Intersectional analysis will help Asian environmental

[15] Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, traces its roots in feminism and critical race theory. The term is used to address the marginalization of black women, specifically to emphasize "the ways in which social movement organization and advocacy around violence against women elided the vulnerabilities of women of color, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities." (Carbado et al., 2013); see also (Crenshaw, 1991).

philosophy shape a more holistic approach while being critical of specific unjust practices embodied within a particular culture. For example, while some "Asian" cultural elements may be considered environmentally sustainable, the same exact cultures may not promote gender equality as they perpetuate patriarchal systems (Keneipfenuo, 2018; Sihombing, 2023). Conversely, some societal elements from "the West" may seem to support technological advances for eco-engineering projects but are still dependent on an economic system, especially capitalism, through which transnational companies flow global capital from the periphery to the center of power, wherever the power lies (Klein, 2015). Intersectionality exposes loopholes in acts of eco-cultural generalization and essentialism and helps us view ecological issues integrated into every dimension of life. In this sense, environmental justice—and, more broadly, environmental ethics and philosophy– cannot be conceived in isolation from other facets of justice, including gender, race, multispecies (Rupprecht et al., 2020), and climate justice (Caney, 2005).

4. Conclusion

From pollution to biodiversity loss, environmental issues will continue to raise questions regarding our relationship to nature and to each other, from our ways of life to our worldviews. Within this context, environmental philosophy has a key role in offering diverse ways to make sense of the environmental crisis and our place within the multispecies world. Hence, exploring our individual and collective roles in the natural world urges us to reflect on our identities, as well as on the beliefs and rhetoric that tend to be taken for granted.

This paper is the fruit of discussions based on our experiences as researchers from a variety of cultural, traditional, linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds who seek ways to collaborate in the field of Asian environmental philosophy. We suggested five pathways to help navigate environmental philosophies that are rooted in local sociopolitical context and tied to cultural identities while avoiding vilifying and essentialist rhetoric: contextualize, quantify uncertainty and "uniqueness," downscale, confront claims with local realities and literature, and collaborate with researchers from other disciplines.

Finally, we hope to inspire the reader to participate in the virtuous circle of nuancing ecological nationalistic or eco-orientalist attitudes in order to improve intercultural collaboration on environmental philosophies and thereby contribute to developing and exchanging ideas and worldviews that support environmental sustainability.

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