Toward Multiple Conceptions of the Human–Nature Relationship: The "Human–Nature Unity" Frame in a Chinese Village

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Entangled within dominant Western ecocultural conceptions, "spectacular nature" is a commonsense frame that perceives nature as a scenic and resourceful spectacle alienated from humanity. By analyzing the human–nature relationship implied by this frame, this article seeks to reveal its inadequacy in accounting for the diversified conceptions of nature held by traditional knowledge systems across the world. To further ground this theoretical critique, the article also examines how residents in a small Chinese village called Heyang make sense of their surrounding environment. The Heyang case suggests that, although China's rapid urbanization and integration into neoliberal globalization has made more and more people there consider nature as an alienated spectacle for consumption, indigenous culture remains influential in mediating Chinese people's conceptual engagement with nature, especially in many rural areas where daily lives are still primarily organized around agricultural activities. The article ends by proposing a theoretical move toward multiple conceptions of a human–nature relationship, which begins with acknowledging diverse experiences of the world.

Keywords: alienation from nature, social construction of nature, environmental communication, Chinese philosophy, epistemological justice

Writing on the modernization paradigm in development communication, Howard (1994) argued that the paradigm's bias toward a Eurocentric vision of modernity led to the colonization of consciousness, through which alternative knowledge systems built on non-Eurocentric community experiences were invalidated and then disenfranchised. Although Howard's observation was made more than two decades ago, the Eurocentric tendency she criticized has persisted until today, preventing the further development of postcolonial knowledge paradigms in communication scholarship. In non-Western countries such as China, for instance, the unproblematic generalization of Eurocentrism often prevails in scholarly discussions (Zhao, 2010). In her discussion of the future of Chinese communication scholarship, Zhao proposes the idea of "looking East, going South" (p. 3) for advancing communication research in the context of global power shifts. Specifically, Zhao identifies four ways to fulfill the idea: (1) to deploy "epistemologies of the South" for more equal knowledge production worldwide, (2) to embrace cultural diversity beyond the homogenizing force of capitalist globalization, (3) to focus more on the increasing communicative and cultural flows within the global South, and (4) to make our analytical attention less

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urban-centric. In this vein, the call for "grounding communication research" invites us to reconsider the discipline's established assumptions in the context of global power shifts, especially in regard to the extent to which these assumptions apply to communication in rural and hinterland regions.

As part of the "Global to Village" Special Section, this article takes on the challenge by examining key assumptions of the human–nature relationship manifested in the emerging field of environmental communication. In response to climate change's growing impacts on natural and human systems, environmental communication is a "crisis-driven field" with normative commitments for ecological protection and justice (Cox, 2013). It mainly concerns the cognitive and behavioral impacts of modern life experience on individuals' engagements with nature. One common observation shared by previous research (e.g., Milstein, 2016; Sullivan, 2016) is that within dominant Western ecocultural conceptions, nature is often perceived as a scenic and resourceful spectacle alienated from humanity, which further renders environmentalism into individualized, market-based solutions. Confronting the pervasiveness of such a cognitive frame, previous research has proposed a wide range of communication strategies to develop alternative frames for encouraging pro-environment behaviors among ordinary citizens.

Yet current discussions on "spectacular nature" are mainly based on the experiences of modernization in North America and Europe, two regions dominated by Western epistemologies. Consequently, theories built on these discussions may not be able to offer satisfying explanations for the social imaginations of nature in other regions of the world. As environmental communication scholarship becomes increasingly diversified, we risk universalizing certain Western epistemological assumptions if established theoretical frameworks in environmental communication are unreflexively applied to non-Western contexts. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine whether the notion of spectacular nature remains pervasive in non-Western contexts where the expansion of industrialization and urbanization are still in progress and face constant challenges from traditional indigenous cultures.

By attending to the human–nature relationship implied by the spectacular nature frame, this article seeks to reveal its inadequacy in accounting for the various conceptions of nature found in diversified traditional knowledge systems. I argue that both the spectacular nature frame and the constructivist criticisms of it do not adequately recognize the reciprocal and holistic views on the human–nature relationship expressed by indigenous cultures worldwide. At the root of such neglect is the inappropriate universalization of capitalist modernity, in which the exploitative urban–rural relationship in the global North is deemed as inevitable. It is necessary to rethink the essentialist tendency embedded in spectacular nature and to make a theoretical move toward multiple conceptions of a human–nature relationship. Here I do not mean to reject the theoretical merits of previous research on spectacular nature or to propose an East–West epistemological dichotomy. The argument is based on the perspective of epistemological justice, which focuses on challenging the culturally monological tendency of dominant Western theories, including critical ones. I agree with Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), who asserts that, as long as Western epistemologies are considered as "universal," they will function as instruments of "globalization from above" and suppress epistemologies from the South.

To further ground this theoretical critique, the article examines the ways in which residents in a small Chinese village called Heyang make sense of their surrounding environment. The Heyang case

suggests that a holistic view of the human–nature relationship derived from indigenous Chinese culture, despite being threatened by the country's dire environmental situation and its integration into neoliberal globalization, remains strong among many rural residents' perceptions of their surrounding environments. Before discussing the details of Heyang, however, I will briefly review the spectacular nature frame and the alienated human–nature relationship it implies.

Contested Understandings of the Human–Nature Relationship

Frequently found in everyday discourses such as TV commercials, tourist brochures, and natural documentaries, the spectacular nature frame refers to the conception that humans are alienated from and audience to a wild nature. Cox (2013) observes that spectacular nature not only encourages certain viewer experiences but also contributes to broader sociocultural meanings of nature. A major contributing factor to the frame's pervasiveness in the public mind is the deep-rooted binary construction of human versus nature in dominant Western epistemologies. Indeed, although the dominant meanings of the term *nature* have experienced multiple historical shifts, the sense of otherness embedded in its public understandings has remained largely intact (Soper, 1995). During the modern era, nature is viewed as either a utopia for seclusion or a resource provider for extraction, which presents a modernist view on nature that acknowledges and even promotes the otherness of nature and humans' dominance over it. Accordingly, "nature is opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity" (Soper, 1995, p. 15). The natural and the social are considered as ontologically different, with the concept of nature mainly referring to the physical world and its laws outside the human sphere.

For environmental communication, the modernist view's persistence among the public is the primary factor contributing to humanity's accelerated domination over nature since the industrial revolution. Although for many people it is a familiar claim that we are alienated from nature today, such a claim in fact suffers from noticeable conceptual challenges if both *nature* and *alienation* are left undefined. As Vogel (2011) summarizes, to decode the dynamics of the human–nature relationship, it is necessary to recognize that "alienation from nature" is a complex theory with at least three variants (traditional, revised, and radical).

To begin with, the traditional interpretation of alienation from nature claims that we are alienated from nature because we fail to recognize we are part of it. Consequently, we act anthropologically by treating nature simply as raw material at our disposal. *Alienation* here simply refers to the process of separation, and to overcome the process of alienation means that we need to give up anthropocentrism and keep our practices ecologically sustainable. Yet once we take the definition of nature set by the modernist view into consideration, the prospect of "reconnecting with nature" set by the traditional interpretation would suffer noticeable conceptual difficulties. Given that nature is the physical world and its laws independent from humanity, alienation from nature becomes an ontological necessity that defines the uniqueness of humans (Vogel, 2011). The critique made by the traditional interpretation thus becomes pointless because humans are already excluded from nature and there is no way back. The conquest of nature, in turn, becomes morally justifiable, and ecological devastation is simply an "unfortunate result" along with humans' transformation of raw materials into artifacts.

It is in this context that the revised interpretation of alienation from nature emerges to accommodate the ontological distinction between humanity and nature. According to this interpretation, nature is indeed beyond us, but it is anthropocentrism that leads us to the misconception that we can fully domesticate and control nature. Following Habermas's discussion on basic and surplus repression, Biro (2005) makes an important distinction between basic and surplus alienation from nature: Whereas basic alienation is the degree "biologically necessary for human life," surplus alienation is the degree "only made necessary in particular form of social organization" (p. 168). Here, the definition of alienation is revised as humans' self-conscious transformation of the natural environment. Such a revision turns alienation from a question of dichotomy to a question of degree. In this regard, the primary fallacy of the modernist view and its associated spectacular nature frame is their legitimation of unnecessary domination occurring in the nonhuman worlds. The revised interpretation represents a theoretical improvement compared with the traditional one. It offers a more grounded explanation for what "unnaturalness" means: The unnaturalness we experience is mainly due to the capitalist system's exploitation of natural resources instead of humanity's material transforming capacity. It also situates this explanation in line with the activist epistemologies followed by the tradition of critical theory: The primary subject for critique is the improper surplus alienation in which we are situated today.

Nevertheless, the revised interpretation remains problematic since its theoretical improvement is achieved by rigorously insisting on humans' exclusion from nature (Vogel, 2011). The revised interpretation still considers alienation from nature as a necessity for the emergence of human civilization. Consequently, the ontological distinction between humans and nature remains intact, and a complete overcoming of alienation is still impossible. Confronting this theoretical challenge, Vogel (2011) proposes a return to Marx (1962), who uses the word *alienation* to describe the fact that products are built by workers' labor input, but they become capitalists' property instead of the workers' means of self-expression. For Marx, the primary function of alienation is to conceal the social character of labor, the origin of humans' material transforming capacity. In other words, Marx's original account of alienation emphasizes the renunciation of ownership or its transfer from the ruled class to the ruling class. By extending Marx's notion of humans as fundamentally active and creative creatures, Vogel (2011) argues that the term *nature* today only denotes the built environment we inhabit, and alienation from nature should be redefined as our failure in recognizing that the world we inhabit is socially constructed. This is a radical departure from previous interpretations, because the concept of nature now only refers to the environment that is materially and symbolically constructed by human activities.

The radical interpretation of alienation from nature proposed by Vogel (2011) echoes many critical thinkers' concern about the pervasiveness of the Anthropocene today. McKibben (1989), for instance, makes the provocative claim that there is no "non-human nature" anymore since anthropological impacts are literally all over the world. Following the radical interpretation, the "death of non-human nature" means that the wild and spectacular nature we perceived is merely a product of symbolic construction, and the alienation from it is mainly caused by our refusal to take responsibility for the environment and its associated problems that we created. This diagnosis attributes the failure of climate actions to the trap of individual imagination under neoliberalism: "The atmospheric CO_2 that is warming the world is an object that we have socially produced but that to each one of us appears like a fact of nature we cannot control" (Vogel, 2011, p. 202). Overcoming alienation becomes possible when humans

stop denying their communal responsibility for sustainability. The radical interpretation of alienation from nature is an adaption of Marx's original alienation theory in political ecology, and it argues that the human–nature relationship, like labor relation in Marx's theory, is a socially constructed relation.

The radical interpretation's rejection of nonhuman nature improves the theoretical consistence of the alienation from nature thesis. It also embraces the postmodern turn in critical scholarship by defining nature as a socially constructed concept generated in the human sphere. Indeed, social constructivism plays a crucial role in guiding current critical inquiries that expose and challenge unsustainable worldviews embedded in media discourse. As Cox (2013) argues, "Our views about the environment may change as new voices and interests arise to contest or challenge prevailing understandings and the core of these challenges is a distinctly human process of construction, questioning and persuasion" (p. 59). Cox's opinion is echoed by other leading scholars working on the interactions between public discourses and environmental issues. Hansen (2010) reminds us that the social constructivist perspective has implications for

> understanding media roles (in environmental discussions) both in relation to how claims are promoted/produced through the public arena of the media and for understanding how the media are a central, possibly the central, forum through which we, as audiences, and publics, make sense of our environment, society, and politics. (p. 18)

Similarly, Macnaghten and Urry (1998), by documenting the public contestations over nature in Britain, contend that how people interact with and attach meanings to natural environments is a dynamic and multifaceted process. Overall, the radical interpretation rejects the binary construction of human versus nature since nature is merely a discursive concept inseparable from symbolic orders and their underlying economic, social, political, cultural, and historical relations (Dingler, 2005). The pervasiveness of spectacular nature, then, is primarily caused by representations that both celebrate the conquest of nature and deny humans' ecological responsibility.

Admittedly, the introduction of social constructivism to the human–nature relationship has its own theoretical difficulties. Ontologically, social constructivism contradicts Marxism's traditional materialist account of nature. For many environmental ethicists, the idea that there is no nonhuman nature beyond humanity is unacceptable, because if such a rejection is taken seriously, we end up privileging human cognitive sovereignty and its creations (i.e., culture and humanized environment) over the physical world and other creatures. For Crist (2004), the constructivist view of nature follows "the Humanist-Cartesian tradition of subject-object separation that grants human cognitive sovereignty over everything" (p. 9). Epistemologically, the constructivist view of nature has been criticized for its ambiguous relativism: Its deemphasis of extradiscursive reality means that there is no criterion to privilege one specific construction of knowledge. As Demeritt (2002) points out, unless there are some neutral and noncontingent means of deciding to what extent the culturally constructed nature corresponds to the essential and materialist nature, truth claims regarding appropriate environmental actions cannot be made and consequently moral judgments become relative. Although these critiques are theoretically challenging, they by no means invalidate the constructivist perspective of environmental communication scholarship. In defense of social constructivism, Dingler (2005) argues that these critiques are untenable due to their underlying misconceptions of the discursive account of nature. For Dingler, the key value of discussing nature's

symbolic character is that such discussions recognize the contingency processed by power and subsequently make it possible to dissolve the Cartesian dualism of acting humans and passive nature. The radical interpretation of alienation from nature questions the established binary construction of human versus nature by highlighting the fact that nature and its associated concepts emerge from a wide range of signifying practices.

So far, this article has focused on delineating the theoretical accounts of the spectacular nature frame offered by the three variants of the alienation-from-nature viewpoint. As the discussion reveals, current environmental communication scholarship recognizes social constructivism as an effective explanation for alleviating the ontological distinction between humanity and nature. Accordingly, this perspective has been frequently adopted by critical inquiries on the otherness of nature embedded in public discourses. The next section reviews how the spectacular nature frame has been analyzed by recent environmental communication research.

Previous Critiques on Spectacular Nature

The prevalence of constructivist criticisms on spectacular nature is well documented by its frequent appearance in the *Journal of Environmental Communication*, the official journal of the International Environmental Communication Association. In 2016, the journal published a special issue (volume 10, issue 6) that explores how "spectacular environmentalism" sets the agenda of ecological politics and four studies that assess problematic public representations of nature. Here, I take a close look at Milstein (2016) and Sullivan (2016), because both studies are emblematic of the common constructivist criticisms made of spectacular nature. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of ecolinguistics and performance studies, Milstein (2016) examines a commonsense performer metaphor entangled within Western ecocultural conceptions—namely, the notion that nature and its habitants offer spectacular shows to humans. By showing the pervasiveness of this metaphor in a typical Western ecotourism setting, she discusses how the metaphor's colonizing power over nature is exacerbated by the profit-based model of ecotourism and the deep-rooted Anthropocene celebrated by Western modernity. Milstein further argues that "the performer metaphor reasserts cultural binaries of self-other, audience-performer, reifying boundaries as they momentarily disassemble" (p. 242). For Milstein, an alternative to counter the performer metaphor's limits is to reformulate the tourist as witness instead of audience/fan/talent scout for the purpose of highlighting the ecological interdependence between human and nature.

In line with Milstein, Sullivan's (2016) research explores the framing and compositional tendencies of nature in natural history filmmaking. By criticizing what she defines as "the money shot," Sullivan elaborates how spectacular technical mediations are applied to nature to generate dramatic effects to fulfill the need of profit making. An interesting yet uncomfortable observation by Sullivan is the parallel between pornographic films and wildlife documentaries, with some wildlife documentaries' focus on aggression, sex, and violence imitating the experiences and expectations of bodies, sexuality, and gender relationships set by pornography. To this end, she argues that the money shot illustrates the contradiction that

> the natures the industry copies, creatively re-presents and circulates are simultaneously often the victims of the capitalist socioeconomic relations which the industry perpetuates and is situated within, whilst also comprising the increasingly scarce phenomena that enable the industry to thrive within this economic system. (p. 755)

For Sullivan, to resist the problematic images and communications deployed by the money shot, we need to encourage an activist frame that exposes and challenges industrial capitalism's violent invasion of nature.

This review elaborates several commonalities shared by constructivist criticisms on spectacular nature. First, these criticisms are often built on framing theory, which emphasizes the ideological systems built by repetitive semiotic representations of nature and these systems' cognitive impacts over their followers' conceptions of the human–nature relationship. Second, the primary factor contributing to the problematic spectacular nature frame, according to these criticisms, is the hierarchal view that celebrates humans' separation from and domination of nature. As Lakoff (2010) notes, the separation between human and nature is deep in our conceptual system, and, as a result, we constantly conceptualize nature as other. Dryzek (2013) also defines such separation as a foundational worldview underlying anthropocentric views of contemporary environmental crisis. Finally, by proposing alternative concepts such as "witness to nature" and "activist frame," criticisms, Milstein (2016) and Sullivan (2016) situate the ideological struggles against the spectacular nature frame in two fronts: Politically, they emphasize direct confrontations with capitalism's exploitative logic, and, culturally, they emphasize an embrace of the ecological interdependence between human and nature.

While I agree that our perceptions of nature are socially constructed and the exploitative logic of anthropocentric views on nature are indeed detrimental for a sustainable future, I also think that these critiques have largely failed to recognize the frame's ideological resonance with the dualistic tendency embedded in dominant Western epistemologies, which conceptualizes the world in a series of binaries such as civilized versus barbaric and core versus periphery. While social constructivism tries to depart from dualism, such departure seems to be incomplete, because the dualism's epistemological foundation— "the underlying presumption of a superior white Western self as referent of analysis" (Sundberg, 2009, p. 640)—only receives indirect challenges. As Santos (2014) argues, the otherness of nature found in dominant Western epistemologies is grounded on the Cartesian idea that nature is a "res extensa"—an unlimited resource unconditionally available to humans. The persistence of such otherness is caused by dominant Western epistemologies' outward expansion through modernization, which leads to the suppression of a reciprocal human–nature relationship expressed in many indigenous knowledge systems. In this regard, moving beyond spectacular nature calls for an epistemological openness that better accommodates the strength and logic of environmental conceptions based on non-Eurocentric social imaginations of the human–nature relationship.

My argument here echoes recent calls for cultural reflexivity in other disciplines. In critical discourse analysis, for instance, there is a growing recognition that the field's current paradigmatic foundation is culturally monological because it inherits the Western intellectual tradition's privilege of fundamentalism and universalism (Shi-xu, 2014). Similarly, scholars of intercultural communication have called for establishing epistemologically specific paradigms to properly interpret communications in the

global South (Asante, 2007). The gist of these discussions is a desire for reconstructing non-Western epistemological paradigms in coexistence and dialogue with the dominant Western ones. Echoing such a commitment, deconstructing spectacular nature requires us to consider not only how capitalism rationalizes the exploitation and domination of nature but also how this process of rationalization is exacerbated by the binary construction of self versus other.

To elaborate the above argument, the following sections report on my fieldwork that investigates how the human–nature relationship is understood by residents in a Chinese village called Heyang. My intention here is neither to establish an East–West dichotomy in public understandings of nature, nor to argue that the conception of nature offered by traditional Chinese philosophy is better than the ways nature are perceived in dominant Western epistemologies. Instead, my aim is to demonstrate how public conceptions of nature are grounded in specific cultural traditions and compatible to specific local perspectives.

Research Context

Everyday life experience is a key mediator of how people make sense of nature. This is especially remarkable in rural China, where fierce clashes are occurring between the forces of capital accumulation and traditional collective lifestyle. A wide range of economic, political, and cultural reforms have accelerated rural China's integration into global economic and social networks, leading to prominent phenomena such as the vast migration of labor from the countryside to cities, the improvement of rural infrastructure construction, and the rise of township enterprises. Yet rural China remains a stronghold of socialist legacy and traditional culture, with widespread anxiety and resistance concerning the rapid decline of village collective. As such, contemporary rural China presents a unique setting for exploring how local perspectives and cultural traditions continuously mediate public understandings of the human–nature relationship.

The current research—part of the "Global to Village: Grounding Communications Research" project—centers on two weeks of fieldwork during summer 2015 in a small Chinese village called Heyang. As Yuezhi Zhao notes in the introduction to this Special Section, Heyang is by no means a "typical" Chinese village, because rural areas in the country are extremely diverse in their historical, social, and cultural formations. Yet how residents in this small village attach meanings to their surrounding environment offers valuable insights for understanding the broader picture of the human–nature relationship in contemporary China. Like many other Chinese villages, livelihood in Heyang is caught up in the country's evolving urban–rural dynamics. Located in Jinyun County of Zhejiang Province, Heyang is a small village with fewer than 4,000 residents. Founded more than 1,000 years ago, the village is an ancestral village of the Zhu clan, and even today most residents still share family ties with one another. Heyang is located in a poor interior mountainous region that is relatively far from Zhejiang Province's coastal economic centers (i.e., Hangzhou, Ningbo, and Wenzhou). Consequently, although for many years there has been a continuous trend of Heyang residents moving to bigger cities as migrant workers, livelihood within Heyang is still primarily organized around small-scale agricultural activities. The village's mountainous landscape also makes agricultural production challenging. As a local proverb describes it, the region is composed of *ba-shan-yi-shui-yi-fen-tian*: 80% mountain, 10% river, and 10% farmland.

Three sociocultural factors are worth considering in regard to how Heyang residents perceive the human–nature relationship. First, despite a series of economic and administrative restructuring since the 1980s, the notion of the village as a collective has persisted among many Heyang residents due to the family ties they share and the dominance of small-scale agriculture in the village's economic structure. Second, the Xiandu (the palace of gods) scenic area in Jinyun, Heyang's governing county, is one of the most sacred places in Daoism. Accordingly, Heyang inherits a strong Daoist heritage, with feng shui being well respected by residents. During China's dynastic era, Heyang produced many successful businesspeople, landlords, and intellectuals. Today this historical fact is attributed to the local feng shui by many Heyang residents, who are proud of living in a place with well-circulated chi (*you-ling-qi*; Zhou & Zhang, 2011). Finally, Heyang sustains a strong educational tradition backed by its impressive history of producing successful intellectuals through the imperial examination system during China's dynastic era. This strong linkage to Confucianism not only makes education a priority in the local cultural tradition but also embeds Confucianism's indigenous view on environmental stewardship into many residents' intuitive understandings of everyday life.

One ongoing controversy putting nature-related discussions at the center of Heyang's public agenda is the local government's initiative of turning the village into a national site for cultural and ecological tourism. Heyang's historical dwellings are among the few well-preserved traditional rural architectural complexes in China. Since the early 2000s, the Heyang village council, the village's governing body, has actively engaged in rural tourism development, aiming to transform Heyang to a "heritage village" for nostalgic urban visitors. The central task of this initiative is to make either renovation or relocation arrangements with Heyang residents currently occupying the historical dwellings. The initiative has largely failed due to lack of support from residents, many of whom share different opinions regarding their relocation arrangements and how their historical dwellings would be preserved and modified.

In 2011, Heyang's historical dwellings were officially recognized as a provincial-level heritage protection site, which led to the formation of the Heyang Traditional Village Protection and Development Administration (Chinese abbreviation: *guan-wei-hui*, hereafter the Heyang Administration). Since then, both the Heyang village council and the Heyang Administration have directed the village's development. In May 2013, by boasting its status as a Chinese State-Council sanctioned national key cultural heritage protection site, the village made an aggressive move to attract an intensive 5 billion Chinese yuan (about U.S.$810 million) development initiative, which subsequently intensified the various conflicts between the local government and residents. During my fieldwork in Heyang, public conversations were largely centered on the failure of the tourism development and the series of problems associated with it. In short, the tourism development, along with its embedded modernization, provides the immediate context for Heyang residents to attach meanings to their surrounding environment, while this sense-making process is also embedded in the village's broad historical and cultural contexts.

For my fieldwork, I went to Heyang as a team member of the "Global to Village: Grounding Communications Research" project. The research trip included field observation, two interviews with Heyang officials, one large focus group session with 15 officials from Jinyun County who are originally from Heyang and still frequently visit Heyang due to family connections, and 32 semistructured focus

group sessions. The collected empirical materials consisted of field notes and group interview recordings. For the focus groups, the 12 members of our research team were divided into four smaller groups based on our research themes. Each group held eight focus groups, with up to six participants at each session. Overall, the research team held 32 focus group sessions lasting between 2 and 3 hours, with a total of 94 participants. The participants of these focus groups were recruited with the assistance of local officials, and they were all self-identified as active participants in local affairs. The results presented below are primarily based on my field observation of everyday life in Heyang and my interactions with ordinary residents during the eight semistructured focus group discussions I participated in.

My original intention before the formal start of the research trip was to examine the dynamics of environmental decision making in rural China. Initially, my research was designed around issues related to environmental engagement. In my interactions with local officials and residents, I asked questions such as "How do you understand the concept of environmental protection?" and "What environment-related suggestions will you make to the village council?" While my conversations with them did identify a couple of problems in Heyang's current environmental engagement mechanisms, I was puzzled by a consistent pattern in the focus group discussions: Many residents' conceptions of the human–nature relationship were quite different from established theories in environmental communication. For instance, during the focus group interviews, the participants only used the term "environmental issue" (*huan-jing-wen-ti*) to refer to problems found in their living context (i.e., Heyang and its rural setting), showing little interest of discussing the various crises imposed to nonhumanized nature. Yet such responses should not be confused with the sense of alienation under the spectacular nature frame because these participants also expressed considerable resistance to alienated, modern lifestyles in urban China. This pattern was also found in other aspects of everyday life in Heyang—namely, the architectural layout and local legends that embodied how historically Heyang residents attached meanings to their surrounding environment. Additional reflection on this pattern drew my attention to the public perceptions of the human–nature relationship in Heyang.

"Harmony in Heyang Is Disrupted"

How Heyang residents attach meanings to their surrounding environment indicated a consistent and distinctive pattern that made no distinction between humanized and nonhumanized environments. Initially, I questioned whether such a pattern resulted from the residents' lack of environmental awareness. Following existing environmental communication literature, my assumption was that Heyang residents, like their counterparts in urban China, suffered from "alienation from nature" due to the increasing presence of capitalist modernity. As my fieldwork progressed, however, this assumption was rejected. Although most focus group participants acknowledged their desires for modern infrastructure and improvements to their livelihoods, they viewed these improvements as a way of accommodating, instead of transforming, their rural locality built on collective land ownership and small-scale agriculture. These participants held an exceptionally unified pride of Heyang being a place "close to nature." They also shared serious concerns about the efficacy of Heyang's current developmental plan, expressing strong pessimistic feelings about the benefits of the tourism project for bringing a better living environment. As one participant put it:

> The tourism development has been running for more than a decade, yet most of it are official talks over and over again. Our living conditions have gone even worse actually. You know, there is a proverb in Heyang now: "Tourism turns historical dwellings into bitter dwellings." (Group 2)

Sentiments like this were common among the eight focus groups I participated in, with many participants expressing considerable skepticism that they would enjoy "good lives" if Heyang was fully transformed into a "modern village." As Xiaoxing Zhang discussed in his contribution to this Special Section, many residents were dissatisfied with the fact that their village was turned into a "romantic spectacle" for the exploitative gazes of urban tourists. For instance, a sewage renovation project in the historical dwellings, which was under construction during my fieldwork, received frequent criticisms from the focus group participants. In fact, these criticisms functioned almost as an antipolitical ritual among the participants, intensifying their frustrations about how Heyang's established harmony was disrupted by the tourism development. Several participants described how they were frustrated by the sewage renovation's poorly managed process:

> You asked us about our environmental concerns. You see the muddy road out by the ancestral hall [where the focus groups took place]? That's an environmental hazard for many of us. Our roads are so bad and the preservation of historical dwellings makes the situation worse. We know that we can't simply put cement roads within historical dwellings, but the village council should have come up with some solutions. . . . Now the situation is getting even worse because of the sewage renovation project, which further disturbs our daily activities. (Group 5)

Others likewise identified how the design process of the sewage renovation project neglected the residents' knowledge about their surrounding environment:

> Speaking of the sewage renovation project, what makes me so mad is the fact that they [the village council] simply got it approved after listening to some so-called experts from the province, without making any consultation with us. I heard that those experts simply walked around the village a couple of times and then quickly drew the blueprint. What kind of experts are they? We told them so many times that the septic tank of the sewage should not be put on the high ground of the village since that area often gets flooded in the summer and polluted water would then flow to nearby farmland, but they wouldn't listen to us. (Group 5)

The defining quality of these discussions was that many Heyang residents, when discussing environmental problems, made no distinction between humanized and nonhumanized environments. For them, issues such as the sewage renovation project only became environmental hazards when they caused inconvenience to everyday life, whereas whether such issues imposed potential threats to nonhuman creatures or nature itself made little sense. When I followed up with the participants regarding their understandings of nonhumanized nature, the most common response I got was confusion. As one participant argued, "That distinction is weird and beyond my understanding. We don't make such

distinction because we live in nature; you see, unlike city dwellers, we are surrounded by mountains and our lives depends on land."

The ways Heyang residents attach meanings to their surrounding environment should not be confused with the spectacle nature frame held by many Chinese urban residents today. For Heyang residents, nature is not for exploitative or romantic gazes. To the contrary, it is embodied in the farmland they work on, the mountain they climb, as well as the livestock they raise. Nature is an inseparable part of their daily lives. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to summarize the public understandings of nature among Heyang residents as an instantiation of the indigenous notion of human–nature unity, which emphasizes a reciprocal and harmonious human–nature relationship. As Tucker and Grim (2014) argue, narratives about human–nature unity in contemporary China, especially rural areas, represent a sense of "positive symbiosis," which originates from China's premodern environmental ethics that embraces the complex relation between the physical world and human body/spirituality. While such an understanding may contradict the country's harsh environmental reality, it still presents a genuine desire to protect the environmental conditions that are crucial for maintaining rural China's agriculture activities and lifestyles. Admittedly, Heyang residents' nondifferentiated treatments of humanized and nonhumanized environments are indicative of their lack of ecological knowledge. Yet it is also crucial for us to consider and respect the rationales behind their understandings of nature. The next sections describe in detail the different aspects of the human–nature relationship in Heyang.

Human–Nature Unity as an Intuitive Understanding of Nature

A defining feature of Heyang's natural environment is the Heyang stream running across the east side of the village. The stream has been the village's vital water resource for centuries, and even though tap water has been installed in every household, many residents still choose to do laundry in the stream, considering it more natural and convenient than using washing machines. In recent years, however, mining and poultry activities in the upper reaches of the stream have severely contaminated the stream, leaving fewer and fewer residents willing to directly use water from the stream. During the focus group discussions, one participant shared a story about his childhood experience of swimming in the stream and how it constituted an important part of his memory of Heyang's good environment in the old days. He described his frustration and disappointment regarding the local government's failure to protect the stream:

> Participant 2: I have such a good memory about the stream. I used to swim in it every day when I was a child, and I can tell you, the water was so clean back then. You can still find people doing laundry today, but I bet nobody would allow his/her kid to swim there anymore. The water is dirty now because of the dirty water from upstream. . . . What makes me sad is that kids nowadays won't have fun in the water as what we used to do.

> Participant 5: So they [the kids] just stay at home and play computer games.

> Participant 4: Yes, the environment in Heyang has changed; although we got richer, we definitely lose some connections with the environment. (Group 3)

Virtually every focus groups I participated in featured similar discussions of the participants' personal and nostalgic feelings about "good old days" and how they were better integrated with nature back then. While such discussions often ended with criticisms of the Heyang village council and the Heyang Administration, utterances emphasizing human–nature unity in Heyang's old days were equally pervasive. They were frequently invoked by participants to legitimize their criticisms and then echoed by others without questioning. These statements were rarely grounded in empirical evidence. Instead, they were primarily expressed in the forms of anecdotes and aphorisms.

These repetitive narratives thus constitute a kind of cognitive frame shared by Heyang residents when they attach meanings to their surrounding environment. As Lakoff (2010) points out, cognitive frames facilitate the creation of "symbolic realities" that guide future actions. These guided actions in turn reinforce metaphors' symbolic power. Moreover, "many frame-circuits have direct connections to the emotional regions of the brain" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 72), which suggests that frames emerge from bodily experience within cultural and environmental contexts. At Heyang, the focus group participants intuitively adopted the human–nature unity frame when they were involved in environment-related conversations. This frame's origins are complex and go far beyond the scope of this article. Crucial to the current research, though, are the notions of how it has been sustained by Heyang's cultural and environmental contexts and how it imposes noticeable effects on the residents' understanding of local environmental policies. With respect to the frame's cognitive effects, it is crucial to recognize the extent to which the intuitive notion of human–nature unity shared by Heyang residents makes them sensitive to any change in their living environment that may cause the decline of the village's own locality. While such indigenous form of ecological consciousness contradicts the scientific views of modern environmental management, its profound cultural and affective coherence within Heyang's public conversations should be recognized. Indigenous knowledge such as human–nature unity has created a sense of "village rationality" in rural China, which has played a vital role in sustaining a 6,000-year history of irrigated agriculture that "internalizes risks by its multifunctional rural cultures of sustainable self-reliance" (Wen, Lau, Cheng, He, & Qiu, 2012, para. 3).

Meanwhile, a proper recognition of the human–nature unity frame would also allow us to better understand the residents' seeming indifference to government policies. The intuition and affect emphasized in the human–nature unity frame contradicts the abstract conception and scientific expertise embedded in government discourse. Consequently, although virtually all focus group participants in my research group were enthusiastic about government initiatives (e.g., ecological civilization) that seek to balance economic development and ecological sustainability, many remained ambivalent about the actual efficacy of these policies because they barely speak to their everyday concerns. Many worried that government policies simply turned into political spectacles with no "real action." One participant gave the following response when asked about his understanding of the term *ecological civilization*:

> Ecological civilization . . . yes, I definitely heard that term before. But to be honest, I think the concept is too big for us. Let me put in this way: To me, ecological civilization means that when you walk out of your house, you see that the village is well afforested. There are enough supporting facilities for everyday life and every family lives together

happily. The village's streetlights are constructed and its roads are not difficult to walk anymore. The historical dwellings are restored and reborn. . . . You see, these are my concerns about having a good life, but big talks from the central government sometimes fail to translate into actions dealing with these problems. (Group 8)

Government initiatives clearly inspired the participants, but their scientific rationales failed to recognize the indigenous knowledge held by the participants, who retreated to a cynical perspective on politics. It is thus imperative for us to consider how future policies would better accommodate intuitive notions such as human–nature unity in rural China.

The Embodiments of Human–Nature Unity in Heyang

Acknowledging the prevalence of human–nature unity among Heyang residents improves our understanding of how they attach meanings to their surrounding environment. To grasp the different dimensions of this frame, however, it is equally important to bring Heyang's local perspectives into the heart of the analysis. As Zhou and Zhang (2011) argue in their cultural analysis of Heyang's historical dwellings, Heyang is emblematic of how traditional Chinese villages embody the "practical wisdom" rooted in premodern China's indigenous culture. Practical wisdom emphasizes the self-sustaining of one's life at physiological, material, and spiritual levels. Following such wisdom, a desired human–nature relationship is a sense of "positive symbiosis" that seeks to treat nature reciprocally and harmoniously. This indigenous ecological consciousness has been sustained for centuries by material and cultural embodiments in Heyang, such as the village's historical architectural layout and the local Zhu clan's family doctrines and teachings.

The founding fathers of Heyang's Zhu clan, when they selected the village's site more than 1,000 years ago, gave thorough consideration to the local feng shui. Although today feng shui tends to be simply regarded as superstition, it is crucial to recognize that the ideological foundation of this concept is the indigenous dialecticism of traditional Chinese philosophies, in which everything is considered to be dynamically connected, negating the mutual exclusiveness between subject and object (Chen, 2007). The primary concern of feng shui is how to achieve harmony between human and nature. Rather than emphasizing how a natural landscape can be altered following humans' initiative, feng shui holds that harmony is only achievable when humans attune to the moods and rhythms of nature. Deriving from such a holistic view of the universe, Heyang's architectural layout was designed following the Daoist notion of "following the ride" (*shun-shi-er-wei*), with an emphasis of respectful utilization of natural resources.

Heyang is surrounded by Mount Xianxia and its branches, which provide a natural barrier for residents during the windy winters of costal China. These mountains have relatively gentle slopes, which considerably reduces the risk of landslide. During premodern China, these mountains provided a precious space for essential resource-collection activities, such as cutting firewood and harvesting herbs. An old official road on the east side of the village provided access to other villages and counties, and the Heyang stream, while functioning as a water and fishing source, was also used for water transportation. In contrast to the south-facing design of most traditional Chinese architectures, Heyang's historical dwellings were built with either southwest or northeast entrances to optimize the village's layout with minimal

alteration of its natural topography. In short, even if we do not consider the feng shui elements of Heyang's overall layout, the village itself was designed and built with indigenous understandings of sustainability that integrated humanized and natural environments. As Zhou and Zhang (2011) note, the ways Heyang's historical dwellings were designed and built represent a transcendental interpretation of the original Daoist conception of human–nature unity, which considers nature, as represented by the ecological system in which Heyang is situated, as part of a "bigger life" that connects everything. The lives of humans need to be respected, as do nature and the creatures living in it.

More impressively, the human–nature unity designed into Heyang's everyday life has been sustained by the indigenous cultural texts created by the Zhu clan. In indigenous Chinese culture, family doctrines (*jia-xun*) inherited by a clan offer critical moral and behavioral guidance for its members. For Heyang's Zhu clan, indigenous ecological consciousness embedded in its family doctrines has played a critical role in the formation of the intuitive understanding of human–nature unity among the current generation of Heyang residents. As mentioned earlier, the mountains surrounding Heyang provided it with vital resources during premodern China. Recognizing the significance of these mountains, Heyang's ancestors made intentional efforts to protect the village from deforestation. Within the local family doctrines, one important text called "shan-chuan-kao" documented the details of Heyang's surrounding mountains and rivers and issued serious warnings to the entire Zhu clan about the consequences of changing the village's nearby feng shui (Zhou & Zhang, 2011). The Zhu clan was once in a life-and-death situation during its 16th generation, and this history was explicitly attributed in the text to the disrespect to feng shui. Although this explanation was inaccurate, it functioned as an effective allegory about environmental protection among the Zhu clan. Heyang's surrounding vegetation remained sustainable until the republic era of China.

Besides mystifying and promoting environmental protection through feng shui, the Zhu clan's family doctrines also adopted the teachings of both Confucian and Daoist traditions to define environmental protection as a path to achieve a harmonious relation between the physical world and human body/spirituality. During the late Qing Dynasty, Xiguang Zhu, an intellectual belonging to the 35th generation of the Zhu clan, wrote an article called *Fang-sheng-xu*, which was mentioned frequently during my conversations with Heyang residents. In this article, the author focused on why fishing in a local pond was prohibited. His central argument was developed through discussing humans' ability to sense the vitality embedded in different life forms following the notion of "everything on earth is connected in essence," expressed in both Confucian and Daoist traditions (Zhou & Zhang, 2011). According to Xiguang Zhu, prohibiting fishing was a way of showing respect to nonhuman life forms, and only through such respect could we live in concordance with the spirituality of the universe. The most distinctive feature of this argument was that ecological consciousness was regarded as a moral requirement of self-improvement. As *Fang-sheng-xu* was codified into the family doctrines, ecological consciousness was subsequently legitimized as part of Heyang's cultural tradition. In many ways, such moralization explained why, during the focus group discussions, the participants expressed strong emotional attachment to the village itself.

Taken together, the presence of the human–nature unity frame among Heyang residents is not an incidental phenomenon. The above analysis of Heyang's local perspectives demonstrates that the

frame itself has been built into Heyang's cultural tradition throughout history. While concepts such as feng shui and family doctrine may seem outdated, residents nonetheless have been able to maintain a sustainable agricultural economy at Heyang for more than 1,000 years, and at the heart of these concepts are the senses of sharing and living with limited natural resources. As summarized by Tiejun Wen and his colleagues (2012),

> Village rationality was originally derived from traditional rural culture that stressed resource sharing, income parity, cooperative solidarity, social justice, and the morality of village elites . . . these indigenous cultural features were originally created in response to extreme constraints of limited natural resources during the thousands of years of rural China's history of irrigated agriculture. (para. 11)

In the era of neoliberal globalization, how to maintain such village rationality is an unneglectable challenge for Heyang and many other similar villages in China.

Concluding Remarks

This article argues that the spectacular nature frame frequently discussed in environmental communication does not adequately account for the epistemological diversity found in public perceptions of the human–nature relationship in indigenous cultures. Such inadequacy can be attributed to the lack of recognition of this frame's ideological resonance with the dualist tendency of dominant Western epistemologies. By discussing how public perceptions of the human–nature relationship are revealed in the form of human–nature unity at Heyang, the article makes the case that only by embracing a perspective of epistemological justice can we begin to truly appreciate the unique understandings of nature held by Heyang residents and other people of indigenous cultures. In the case of Heyang, the prevalence of the human–nature unity frame can be attributed to the dominance of small-scale agrarian economy in the village and the Confucian and Daoist philosophical thoughts embedded in the village's architectural layout and family doctrines.

The desire for a reciprocal human–nature relation expressed by Heyang residents is by no means unique to indigenous Chinese culture. Similar expressions can be found in other indigenous cultures worldwide. The indigenous understandings of nature held by First Nations in North America, for instance, highlight a sense of proper respect for Mother Nature, which has become an inseparable component of current decolonization efforts in Canada. As Coulthard (2014) notes:

> It became apparent within our communities [First Nations] that the organizational imperatives of capitalist accumulation signified an affront to our normative understanding of what constituted proper relationships—relationships between people, relationships between humans and their environment, and relationships between individuals and institutions of authority. (p. 62)

Overcoming the essentialist tendency embedded in capitalist modes of thinking thus requires a move toward multiple conceptions of a human–nature relationship, which is not only necessary but also

highly probable if we reappropriate non-Western epistemological paradigms in coexistence and dialogue with the dominant Western ones.

There is still a long way for the realization of epistemological justice, and much work is still needed to further substantiate the above proposal. Indeed, as Santos (2014) argues, the first step toward epistemological justice is mutual intelligibility among the diverse experiences of the world. As environmental communication is increasingly internationalized, it is time for this field to account for the epistemological diversity of the world.

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