Nature as a Palimpsest – Conceptual Histories Across Cultures

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Природата като палимпсест – концептуални истории в различните култури

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes *nature* as a dynamic and multilayered construct, whose meanings emerge through continuous processes of accumulation, transformation, and cross-cultural interaction. Rather than replacing earlier meanings, new interpretations of nature are added to pre-existing ones, resulting in a palimpsestic structure in which different semantic layers coexist. Drawing on a comparative framework, the study traces the historical evolution of the concept across Western and Chinese traditions, emphasizing both internal developments and intercultural exchanges. In the European context, nature has its roots in Ancient Greece, when it was defined as a dynamic process. Its understanding has constantly changed, being shaped by theological, scientific, and industrial paradigms, becoming a term defined by its opposition to *culture*. In parallel, the Chinese conceptual field – articulated through paradigms of thought such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – develops a relational understanding of the world, in which humans are embedded within a continuous process of transformation. The encounter with Western modernity in the early twentieth century introduces new semantic layers into the Chinese conceptualization of nature, while contemporary ecological thought echoes Chinese concepts such as 自然 (*ziran* – nature as a self-generating process). Methodologically, the article combines conceptual history and comparative analysis, within the interdisciplinary field of Environmental Humanities, paying particular attention to the interplay between linguistic, philosophical, and cultural dimensions. By foregrounding the stratified nature of the concept, the study argues that nature cannot be understood as a stable category, but rather as an open, evolving construct shaped by ongoing processes of reinterpretation and intercultural negotiation.

Keywords: nature, conceptual history, cross-cultural analysis, environmental humanities

Резюме

Тази статия концептуализира природата като динамична и многопластова конструкция, чиито значения се появяват чрез непрекъснати процеси на натрупване, трансформация и междукултурно взаимодействие. Вместо да заместват по-ранни значения, нови интерпретации на природата се добавят към вече съществуващи, което води до палимпсестична структура, в която съжителстват различни семантични слоеве. Въз основа на сравнителна рамка, изследването проследява историческата еволюция на концепцията в западната и китайската традиция, като акцентира както върху вътрешните развития, така и върху междукултурния обмен. В европейския контекст природата има своите корени в Древна Гърция, когато е била определяна като динамичен процес.

Нейното разбиране непрекъснато се е променяло, оформяйки се от теологични, научни и индустриални парадигми, превръщайки се в термин, дефиниран от противопоставянето си на културата. Успоредно с това, китайското концептуално поле – артикулирано чрез парадигми на мисълта като конфуцианството, даоизма и будизма – развива релационно разбиране за света, в което хората са вградени в непрекъснат процес на трансформация. Срещата със западната модерност в началото на XX век въвежда нови семантични пластове в китайското концептуализиране на природата, докато съвременната екологична мисъл отразява китайски концепции като 自然 (зиран – природата като самогенериращ се процес). Методологично, статията съчетава концептуална история и сравнителен анализ в рамките на интердисциплинарната област на екологичните хуманитарни науки, като обръща особено внимание на взаимодействието между езиковите, философските и културните измерения. Като изтъква стратифицирания характер на концепцията, изследването твърди, че природата не може да се разбира като стабилна категория, а по-скоро като отворена, развиваща се конструкция, оформена от непрекъснати процеси на преосмисляне и междукултурно договаряне.

Ключови думи: природа, концептуална история, междукултурен анализ, екологични хуманитарни науки

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Nature is one of the fundamental concepts through which human communities have tried to understand and describe their relationship with the surrounding world. However, nature is not a category with a fixed and unchanging meaning, but rather a cultural construct whose connotations have continually evolved. Each cultural space has added new meanings to this concept, without the previous ones disappearing entirely. In this paper, I propose understanding nature as a conceptual palimpsest: a multilayered construction in which different representations of the world coexist, overlap, enter into dialogue, and transform one another. This perspective makes it possible to examine how different cultural traditions have produced their understandings of nature. In this paper, I will focus on two such palimpsests, the European and the Chinese, not because they exhaust the possible representations of nature, but because their rich traditions have been into dialogue since the beginning of modernity and their interactions continue to influence contemporary understandings of nature.

Originally referring to a manuscript from which an earlier text had been erased in order to make room for a new one, while still preserving traces of the previous writing, the palimpsest entered modern theoretical discourse through Thomas De Quincey's 1845 essay "The Palimpsest." As Sarah Dillon observes, De Quincey transformed the term from a paleographical object into a broader conceptual and metaphorical framework, thus marking "the beginning of a consistent process of metaphorisation of palimpsests from the mid-nineteenth century (the most prolific period of palimpsest discoveries) to the present day" (Dillon, 2005, p. 245). Since then, the concept has been used across a wide range of disciplines, from architecture and geography to literary studies and cultural theory, where it helps describe complex structures composed of multiple layers of meaning.

The metaphor of the palimpsest is useful for understanding the concept of nature because it makes it possible to think in terms of both continuity and change, revealing the complex relations between the various meanings it has acquired across various times and cultures. It particularly offers a productive framework for analyzing the concept of nature in both the European and the Chinese contexts. Rather than understanding it as a fixed and stable concept, when viewed from the European and the Chinese perspectives it appears as a multilayered construct, continuously shaped by philosophical traditions, religious beliefs, aesthetic practices, scientific knowledge.

The long history of the concept in the Western world begins in ancient Greece, at a time when "nature" was understood to mean the living world in which matter, spirit, and, above all,

an order imprinted by the very presence of the spiritual element coexist: "Greek natural science was based on the principle that the world of nature is saturated or permeated by mind. Greek thinkers regarded the presence of mind in nature as the source of that regularity or orderliness in the natural world" (Collingwood, 2014/1945, p. 3). From a purely linguistic perspective, the concept was denoted in Greek by a word that referred to a living, dynamic reality: the word "phusis (φύσις), based on the verbal root for 'growing, producing,' phuein" (Ducarme, Couvet, 2020, p. 2). The word is first mentioned in the Odyssey, and the scope of the concept is defined by Aristotle, who, in Metaphysics, uses the word with multiple meanings: "the generation of what grows (as a process), the primordial element from which things grow (as a principle), the principle of movement (a spontaneous cause), and the matter from which things are made (substance)" (Ducarme, Couvet, 2020, p. 2).

Transformation, norm, substance, and the spirit that permeates matter and imposes order upon it – these are some of the guiding principles of nature in Ancient Greece, which the Roman world adopted, translating the Greek *phusis* into the Latin *natura*, derived from the verb *nascor* (to be born). It is Cicero who "introduces a classical opposition between nature and culture, the former being an initial state devoid of human influence, and the latter corresponding to an appropriation by human societies" (Ducarme, Couvet, 2020, p. 2). Through such a distinction, the idea of nature as a place from which humanity gradually withdraws finds its way into Western thought, for the first time. Yet the Roman reinterpretation did not erase the earlier Greek meanings; it added a new layer that would later be reshaped by Christianity.

With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the distinction between humanity and nature became increasingly clear in the Western imaginary. Furthermore, the dynamic, autopoietic meaning of nature was reinterpreted through the lens of the biblical cosmology of creation. Thus, the meaning of the Latin term *natura* became infused with its Hebrew counterpart, *teva*, which, etymologically, refers to "the mark of an artist on its work" (Ducarme, Couvet, 2020, p. 3). Nature is, in this new context, a divine artifact, a construct under divine authority. Viewed as a palimpsest, however, the Christian conception of nature does not present itself a moment of complete rupture from the pre-Christian one, rather it is a process of semantic re-inscription, in which the order previously associated with a cosmos permeated by intelligence came to be understood as the expression of providence.

This distance between the creator and humanity from the created world, upheld by the body-spirit dichotomy, intensified as scientific knowledge refined its tools, beginning in the second half of the 15th century with the discoveries of Copernicus, Telesio, and Bruno. In

contrast to Greco-Roman philosophy, the idea of a nature-as-mechanism takes shape – devoid of intelligence and spirit, incapable of self-governance. The new layer of the palimpsest, however, preserves something very important from what the philosophers of classical antiquity had observed regarding nature – the idea of order as the result of a spiritual force: "The Renaissance thinkers, like the Greeks, saw in the orderliness of the natural world an expression of intelligence: but for the Greeks this intelligence was nature's own intelligence, for the Renaissance thinkers it was the intelligence of something other than nature: the divine creator and ruler of nature" (Collingwood, 2014/1945, p. 5).

During the Enlightenment, Western thought added a new layer to the palimpsest of nature. Understood as a realm governed by laws entirely comprehensible through rational inquiry, nature came to be viewed as a system that could be measured and explained. During the nineteenth century, the concept further developed, as Collingwood (2014/1945) argues, influenced by the idea of evolution. Biology, and above all Darwin's theory, played a central role in this shift. By the late 19th century, biological theories had become "of extreme importance […], because it was this movement of thought which ultimately broke down the old Cartesian dualism of matter and mind by introducing between them a third term, namely, life" (Collingwood, 2014/1945, p. 133). The machine metaphor was overwritten in the modern palimpsest, and the rise of evolutionary biology brought into discussion a perspective through which nature was seen as a place of transformation. In doing so, it reintroduced, in a scientific form, earlier associations of nature with growth and becoming that echo the ancient Greek notion of *phusis*.

While the Western concept of nature developed through layered reinterpretations rooted in ancient Greek thought, the Chinese case followed a slightly different path. Before the contact with Western modernity, Chinese thought did not have a single term directly equivalent to the English *nature*. The modern word *ziran* 自然 was reborrowed from Japanese after the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), in the context of large-scale translations of Japanese kanji (Droz et al., 2022). This does not mean that Chinese thought lacked a concept of nature; rather, it expressed that idea through a range of terms. As Weller (2006) notes, the most common of these before the twentieth century were *tian* 天 / *tiandi* 天地, *shanshui* 山水, and *wanwu* 万物, each emphasizing a different aspect of what we might call nature – ethical, aesthetic, or ontological. Among them, *tian* 天 also became important in Christian missionary translation. In the form *tiandi* 天地, it referred to the totality of what exists between heaven and earth, whereas *tian* 天

on its own carried stronger ethical and moral meanings, designating a higher power taken as a model by all beings under heaven. It was this openness to a superhuman order that led missionary monks to translate *tian* 天 as God.

The Chinese palimpsest of nature was formed through an accumulation of layers belonging to the traditional Chinese thought in which Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism co-exist. Although they frequently intersect in practice, they also emphasize different dimensions of nature which are still visible in contemporary Chinese ways of thinking.

In the Daoist tradition, the world is a self-generating process grounded in *Dao* 道 (literally translated as the *Way*), the ultimate source of all beings, a force that unfolds spontaneously, a principle expressed by the notion of *ziran* 自然. In its classical, Daoist meaning, *ziran* is not nature itself, but the capacity of things to change according to their own patterns.

Daoism does not grant humans a privileged place in relation to all other components of the world. Miller (2017) observes that, in the Daoist context, nature is understood as a reality endowed with its own reason for existing, which humans do not view with the detachment afforded by the analysis of an object. Daoism proposes a view of the natural world "anchored in the subjectivity of nature, a term that derives from the concept of 'Dao follows its own nature' (*Dao fa ziran* 道法自然)" (Miller, 2017, p.18). In the Daoist cosmology, there is no external force, no creator of the world. In such a paradigm, it is not the unidirectional act of a deity that establishes reality, but rather its creative force, which is always capable of sustaining itself, designated by the term *ziran* 自然.

The human body and nature are viewed as systems that strive toward balance, which is understood as the balance of *qi* 氣 (literally, *breath*), which constantly oscillates between its two phases, *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. To maintain their *qi* in optimal condition, people have at their disposal various forms of cultivating their *qi*, one of the simplest forms being breathing. In the case of nature, the primary sources for identifying or influencing the transformative processes through which *qi* passes are found in the *Book of Changes* (Yi Jing) 已經 and in the principles of *feng shui* 風水. The microcosm and the macrocosm are in constant interaction to

achieve/maintain balance, so that in the Daoist perspective nature is a space of interconnection, not of hierarchies, much less of a hierarchy dominated by humans.

If Daoism brought to the Chinese palimpsest of nature a view marked by spontaneity, transformation, and self-generation, Confucianism, by contrast, placed the emphasis on harmony, moral self-cultivation, and the relation between human conduct and the wider order of Heaven (*tian* 天). Although humans fit perfectly among the elements of nature, in the Confucian view they nevertheless occupy a special position, one that this school of thought – perhaps more so than any other paradigm specific to the Chinese world – acknowledges. From a Confucian perspective, what distinguishes humans is, to put it almost tautologically, precisely the quality of being human, *ren* (仁), which they must constantly refine, and education is the instrument through which humans can become perfect individuals, *junzi* (君子).

Like all elements in the universe, the quality of being human is not a given and is not immutable; on the contrary, it is a process that unfolds continuously. Through the Confucian framework for understanding the world, human nature is good but constantly perfectible. Due to this particular aspect of the imagination, Tucker (2020) refers to Confucian moral and spiritual practices using the metaphor of "botanical cultivation" (i.e., botanical cultivation), thereby emphasizing the idea that humans are part of nature, and their perfection as human beings is closely tied to attuning themselves to its rhythms. The process of cultivating one's humanity is an organic one, unfolding gradually, with each stage respected – a process that can neither be bypassed, nor rushed, nor slowed down.

The Confucian view of nature also has, of course, elements in common with the Daoist perspective. The existence of the vital breath, *qi*, in Confucian thought lends unity to the world and abolishes the notion of a rupture that might exist between matter and spirit, between humanity and the world, and between the knowing subject and the object of its knowledge. In this way, a Confucian worldview is constructed that is similar to a certain extent to Daoism, in which nature can be understood as a space of harmonious coexistence, not of competition that establishes hierarchies. Given the specificity of *qi* as an uninterrupted vital force, viewed through the Confucian lens, nature is characterized by its organic, holistic dimension, defined as "the continuity of being" (Tu, 1998), which is based on the uninterrupted presence of *qi* in all forms of manifestation, from stones to humans.

Alongside the continuity expressed through the similarity of all elements – based on the presence of *qi* in each – the Confucian view of the world also presupposes two attributes: totality

and dynamism, traits that grant the entire self-generating vital process "not only inner connectedness and interdependence, but also infinite potential for development." (Tu, 1998, p. 109). The connection between all elements of the cosmos is given, in Confucian-based Chinese cosmology, by their consubstantiality, by the relationships they establish among themselves, and by the fact that, without having a known starting point or an extra-worldly creator, they are part of a process in a state of continuous becoming. In this way, "the Chinese worldview is neither cyclic nor spiral. It is transformational." (Tu, 1998, p. 110). In this perspective, nature is viewed as a unified, interconnected system that excludes no form of existence. Thanks to this extraordinary capacity for inclusiveness, nature is a system in which harmony and mutual understanding prevail among its elements.

Buddhism added yet another layer to the Chinese palimpsest of nature by drawing attention to the interdependence of all forms of existence, in ways that differ from both Daoism and Confucianism. Where Daoism emphasizes spontaneity and self-generation, and Confucianism emphasizes moral self-cultivation, Buddhist thought is more concerned with the relational and impermanent character of reality. The boundary between self and world becomes less fixed, as all phenomena are understood to arise through co-dependence and ongoing transformation. From this perspective, humans are not separate from nature, but part of a web of relations that includes animals, plants, landscapes, spirits, and all sorts of unseen beings.

The special place that nature occupies in Buddhism is illustrated, as Kabilsingh (1990, p. 8–14) observes, by the numerous Buddhist stories that abound in poetic imagery expressing admiration for nature. Among these, a prominent place is occupied by the mythical biography of the Buddha himself, which records that he attained enlightenment under a tree, Ficus religiosa. In addition to the plant world, to which the Buddha has been connected since birth, lies the animal kingdom, addressed by the very first Buddhist precept that explicitly forbids killing any being. Kabilsingh asserts that its role is not limited to being "merely a legal prohibition, but rather an awareness of our kinship with all those with whom we share the gift of life. A heart full of compassion constitutes the solid foundation of this precept" (p. 9).

Given that in Buddhism, as in Daoism, no clear line can be drawn between "inside" and "outside" – since suffering and impermanence are the "substances" from which all that exists is composed – the visible world outside the self, commonly called nature, is more than a mere backdrop for mundane existence, so that it "can function as a teacher when one meditates about impermanence [...], but, most importantly, it is the place made holy by the quest for enlightenment" (Eckel, 1997, p. 346). Given the similarity between the self and the world, to

meditate on the condition of the environment in which you find yourself is to have at hand a mirror through which you actually penetrate the deepest regions of your own being. But the consequences of this interplay do not remain solely on the ideal level, they further extend into the pragmatic sphere, since understanding the world as the space where enlightenment occurs entails an awareness of the need to protect that space.

A distinctive contribution of Buddhism to the Chinese palimpsest of nature is what Alan Sponberg (1997) calls "the hierarchy of compassion." In the Buddhist context, hierarchy does not mean domination or separation, on the contrary, it combines two complementary dimensions: the horizontal interconnectedness of all beings, based on their shared condition of impermanence and suffering, and the vertical dimension of spiritual cultivation, expressed through progress on their way toward enlightenment. In the Buddhist thought, as understood by Sponberg, spiritual development does not confer greater authority over other beings; rather, it presupposes an expanding awareness of interdependence and a deeper ethical responsibility toward all forms of life.

At the beginning of the 20th century, two territories, that of the European palimpsest of nature and that of the Chinese palimpsest, intersect, entering into an unprecedented dialogue. In the midst of modernity, nature understood as a reality subject to scientific investigation encounters the vision of nature in China, in which consubstantiality, transformation, harmony, and compassion are a few of the defining characteristics. Thus, the idea of nature as an object – a material space from which humans are excluded – begins to take root in China, against the backdrop of the country's opening to modernity, which Chinese intellectuals made the core of the May Fourth Movement of 1919. At the same time, the Chinese conceptions on nature gradually enter European intellectual debates, echoing older associations with the Greek *physis*.

The encounter between the two traditions thus did not merely generate new meanings; it also brought previously obscured layers of both palimpsests back into view. Regarding the perspective on nature in China, there are contemporary scholars who point out that the idea of nature as an object, which humans can modify as they please, is by no means new in China, and therefore cannot be attributed to the dialogue that began with European modernity at the start of the 20th century.

In his book on the history of the environment in China, Elvin (2004) points out that as early as the pre-imperial era, there were large-scale projects that converted forests into farmland, diverted waterways through canals, terraced hillsides, and destroyed the habitats of animals and birds. The interdependent relationship between humans and the universe, which

we encounter in all forms of classical thought, did not prevent humans from acting in such a way as to use the natural environment as a resource, leading some researchers (Elverskog, 2020) to assert that there is no difference in China between the modern attitude toward the environment and that evident since antiquity, despite the idealization of the latter, so widespread in Western academia.

A middle position (Weller, 2006) views all projects in premodern China merely as changes to the environment, not as its domination, given that the scale of human interventions in modernity is incomparably greater than in any previous era. This same difference in anthropogenic impact on the environment across different eras leads Elvin (2004) to assert that, strictly in relation to the early medieval period, speaking of a conflict between a sensitivity toward nature – reflected in the aesthetic and religious spheres – and its use as a resource is a mistake, since it means judging a past era through the filter of contemporary reality.

To further nuance the observations regarding how the Chinese world conceptualizes nature and the ways in which it acts upon it, some researchers point out that the difference between the conceptual and the concrete can be explained by the fact that "Religious structures, institutions, and traditions can only instill in people deep dispositions, but they cannot guarantee that agents will always act out or realize these dispositions." (Yang, 2021, p. 24).

In the first half of the 20th century, the encounter between European and Chinese thought favored the spread of a modern interpretation of nature as an object of human knowledge and transformation. In China, this trend reached its most radical form during the Maoist era, when nature was often portrayed as a force to be disciplined and subjugated. In the context of China's efforts to close the industrial and economic gaps with Western nations through the aggressive exploitation of natural resources, environmental interventions have surpassed in intensity and impact anything experienced by imperial China up until the early 20th century. Technological progress, a growing population, but above all, a new political ideology – all of these created the conditions for an attitude that viewed nature not only as an object that could be altered to suit human needs, but also as an adversary against which all forces must be mobilized.

In her book, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and Environment in Revolutionary China* (2001) – one of the most comprehensive studies of China's recent environmental history – Judith Shapiro examines the context that made possible human interventions in nature on an unprecedented scale, the consequences of which are still visible today. Shapiro explains the reification of nature in Maoism as the convergence of two distinct perspectives: on the one

hand, an adherence to the values of modernity (which includes a conception of nature from which humans have been extracted) and, on the other hand, a contemporary reinterpretation of the Confucian legacy, in which humans occupy a privileged position relative to all other components of the world.

What sets this period apart, in terms of the conceptualization of nature, is the emergence of a new idea – nature as an adversary – within a discourse heavily infused with elements from the military imagination. The classical perspective on the environment, which emphasizes harmony among the elements that make up the universe, is replaced by a conflict in which humans assume a superior position over all other components of the world. Shapiro (2001) discusses how the militarization of Chinese society after World War II, aimed at combating potential external and/or internal enemies, extends to the relationship with nature, which has been the target of numerous campaigns involving large-scale actions, the most significant of which were consolidated under the banner of the Great Leap Forward.

By the end of the Maoist era, "nature as object" and "nature as adversary" were concepts that had, in fact, proven to be hollow, although their representation did not disappear from public discourse; rather, their boundaries were refined, allowing for the emergence of a new conceptualization. As a result of the reforms of the late 1980s, which opened China to the world, enabling rapid economic progress and reconciling it with its own cultural heritage, the warlike imagery used to describe it during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution began to fade. In this context, nature began to be viewed not only as a resource to be exploited, but also as a reality with intrinsic value. Circulating in academic circles as early as the 1980s (Wei et al., 2021, p. 1), but only taking shape a few decades later, the term *ecological civilization* (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明) provides the ideological framework for the establishment of a new concept: nature as a value in itself.

In the 20th century European palimpsest, the idea of nature as possessing value beyond its utility to humans re-emerged (a few decades) earlier than in China. A decisive moment in this process was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which transformed environmental degradation from a largely scientific concern into a major public issue. Carson's work drew attention to the fragility of ecological systems and to the fact that human beings cannot be viewed as separate from nature. The efforts of conservation biologists and ecologists that followed further demonstrated the urgency of protecting the more-than-human world.

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, it became increasingly clear that scientific knowledge alone could not bring about the cultural changes required by the

environmental crisis. This realization opened the way for the involvement of the humanities, whose role was seen as crucial for understanding and transforming the narratives through which nature is valued in the contemporary society: "if humanity is the chief cause of the ominous change, it must surely be inevitable that research and policy will be focused on human societies and their basic functions" (Sörlin, 2012, p. 788).

Relationships, dynamism, and unity between man and nature become key elements in the contemporary palimpsest of nature, within the recently established field of Environmental Humanities. The Renaissance metaphor of man as a thinking reed (Pico della Mirandola) was reinterpreted in a sense that arose from the interaction between the physical and metaphysical dimensions of the human being, fully understanding their interdependence. John Seed (1988), an Australian conservationist ecologist, formulates this idea in the vivid image of a being that sees itself as part of the real world, but also as a manifestation of a reflexive consciousness of the world: "'I am protecting the rainforest' develops into 'I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest that has recently emerged into thinking." (p. 36).

Once humans come to be understood as parts of nature rather than its masters or observers, the distinction between nature and culture can be challenged as well. Donna Haraway (2003) proposes the term *natureculture* for this worldview, which speaks to the "implosion" (p. 14) of two elements long considered distinct, and to the fact that we become who we are only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be affected by – and affect – everything around us. Starting from the example of the relationship between humans and the "companion species," the dog, alongside and with which humans have become what they are, Haraway proposes, in place of two opposing spaces, a continuum – *natureculture* – which she illustrates with countless stories that speak of coexistence. Haraway demonstrates that nature is more than a concept used to designate a fragment of the material world and that the various species on the planet – from plants to animals – are, to one another, companions in a permanent "co-evolution" (p. 14). In a more recent study, Haraway (2016) sees *sympoiesis* as the essential feature of this continuum, explaining that *becoming-with* is defining for the way in which each element that makes up the complex web of life evolves.

In the brief overview I provided of nature understood as a palimpsest within European and Chinese cultural spaces, I showed that nature is not, in any culture, a monolithic concept, an autonomous, autopoietic entity with perfectly defined boundaries, but rather, on the contrary, is constituted through constant interferences, shifts in meaning, and reconfigurations that occur both diachronically and synchronically. Fundamentally dynamic, nature is an idea that is

constituted both within a culture and through dialogue with other worlds. Its boundaries shift with the transition from one era to another, through internally generated processes, but also through contact with ideas coming from a different context.

The metaphor of the palimpsest emphasized that the new meanings nature acquires do not replace the old ones, but rather are added to them, in a multilayered, multifaceted, ever-changing construction that unfolds in both directions. There are no spaces that are merely sources and no spaces that are merely targets in the complex process of cultural interference. In my analysis, I have shown that the way nature is understood in contemporary China, in turn, influences the Western space, contributing to the enrichment of meanings in a concept that, in modernity, the West has brought into global circulation.

Last but not least, defining nature is an endeavor that involves advancing simultaneously on two levels – the conceptual and the linguistic – so that the analysis has highlighted which territories correspond to this notion and how they are encoded at the linguistic level.

Nature is an open palimpsest, continuously re-inscribed with meaning through the interactions between the humans and the more-than-human world.

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