

**FDS***Frontiers of Discourse Studies**FDS*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026, pp. 24–40.

Print ISSN: 3106-809X; Online ISSN: 3106-8103

Journal homepage: <https://www.fdsjournal.com>DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64058/fds260102elnhr>

Ecocriticism as a Lens to the “New Humanities”: Reconfiguring Human, Nature, and *Wen*

Gong Haomin

Abstract: This essay examines ecocriticism as a central intellectual force in the emergence of the “New Humanities,” arguing that ecological thought offers vital conceptual resources for rethinking the relationships among humanity, nature, and culture under contemporary global conditions. Situating the discussion within both global debates and modern Chinese intellectual history, the essay frames the new humanities as a response to intensified crises—environmental degradation, technological acceleration, geopolitical instability, and posthuman challenges—that have unsettled traditional humanistic assumptions. Through close engagement with key ecocritical debates on science and the humanities, ecology versus environment, nature versus anthropocentrism, and the spatial dialectics of the global, local, and national, the essay shows how ecocriticism restructures the epistemological and ethical foundations of humanistic inquiry. Central to this argument is the Chinese concept of *wen*, understood as the aesthetic, cultural, and civilizational medium through which humans continuously negotiate their relationship with nature. By foregrounding *wen* as a bridge between nature and civilization, the essay proposes an ecocriticism that neither abandons the human nor reinstates anthropocentrism but instead situates humanity within dynamic, historically grounded, and materially entangled ecological relations. In doing so, the essay argues that the new humanities are both genuinely “new” and productively rooted in long-standing cultural traditions.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; New Humanities; Human; Nature; *wen*

Author Biography: Gong Haomin, Associate Professor at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. His research focuses on modern and contemporary literature, comparative literature, and

Received: 03 April 2026 / Revised: 01 Jun 2026 / Accepted: 09 Jun 2026 / Published online: 15 Jun 2026 / Print published: 30 Jun 2026

cultural studies. E-mail: haomingong@ln.edu.hk

题目：作为“新文科”的生态批评：重构“人”、“自然”与“文”

摘要：本文将生态批评视为“新文科”兴起中的核心思想力量，探讨生态思想如何为在当代全球语境下重新思考人类、自然与文化之间的关系提供关键的概念资源。文章将讨论置于全球性辩论与中国现代思想史的双重背景之中，将新文科界定为对多重危机加剧的回应——包括环境恶化、技术加速、地缘政治不稳定以及后人类挑战——这些危机已动摇了传统人文主义的基本预设。通过细致考察生态批评在科学与人文学科、生态与环境、自然与人类中心主义之间的关键争论，以及全球、地方与国家空间辩证关系等问题，本文展示了生态批评如何重塑人文研究的认识论与伦理基础。该论证的核心在于中国“文”的概念，将其理解为一种审美、文化与文明的媒介，人类正是通过这一媒介不断与自然协商其关系。通过强调“文”作为自然与文明之间的桥梁，本文提出一种既不放弃人类主体也不回归人类中心主义的生态批评路径，而是将人类置于动态的、具有历史基础且与物质世界相互纠缠的生态关系之中。在此意义上，本文认为新文科既“新”，同时又扎根于文化传统之中。

关键词：生态批评；新文科；人类；自然；文

作者简介：龚浩敏，副教授，香港岭南大学中文系，研究方向：中国现当代文学、比较文学与文化研究。电邮：haomingong@ln.edu.hk

It is hardly novel to observe that the humanities, once again, find themselves in a state of crisis. This sense of crisis arises partly from the internal characteristics of the humanities themselves—criticality, reflectivity, and a structural disposition toward questioning authority. These very qualities, which constitute the vitality and ethical imperative of humanistic inquiry, also place the humanities in a perpetual condition of tension and self-interrogation. At the same time, the humanities are continuously shaped—and strained—by the shifting sociocultural conditions. As societies transform, the humanities are repeatedly called upon to interpret those transformations, diagnose their ethical and epistemological implications, and imagine alternative futures. External pressures thus become catalysts compelling the humanities toward renewal.

Over the past century, these pressures have intensified dramatically. Rapid and often disorienting changes driven by economic restructuring, political upheaval, technological acceleration, and the devastating force of modern warfare have presented unprecedented challenges. At various historical junctures, the sheer scale of violence and rupture has appeared to render the foundations of humanistic ideals of reason, dignity, ethical responsibility, and freedom untenable. The humanities have thus been compelled not only to critique the world but also to confront their own limits and complicities.

The emergence of what is now called the “new humanities” may be understood as a direct response to this condition. “We need a new kind of thinking,” Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer (xv) declare in the opening pages of *The New Humanities Reader*, “because we live in a world defined by possibilities, and possibilities go hand in hand with risk and unintended consequences.” Indeed, the new humanities take as their responsibility the task of confronting these possibilities, risks, and unforeseen outcomes. But what, precisely, constitutes these new conditions? And in what concrete ways might the new humanities respond?

This article addresses these questions through the lens of ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry that has arisen in response to one of the most urgent crises of our time, environmental breakdown. In confronting this crisis, ecocriticism offers fresh conceptual frameworks for rethinking “the human,” “the humanities,” and “nature,” and thus constitutes an indispensable dimension of the new humanities. More specifically, I approach the issue from a Chinese perspective situated within the global context, for within the Chinese intellectual tradition, *wen* (literally, “writing” or “pattern”)—the aesthetic, cultural, and civilizational medium through which humans engage with and make sense of nature—plays a uniquely defining role. It is through *wen* that the relationship between humans and the natural world is articulated, negotiated, and continually reimagined, making the Chinese perspective integral to a fuller understanding of what the new humanities might become.

In what follows, I develop this inquiry in three steps. First, I briefly outline the sociocultural context in which the present call for a new humanities has emerged. Second, I examine several key conceptual constellations that structure ecocritical discourse and shape its contributions to the new humanities. Finally, I explore the ecocritical and humanistic potential of the loaded term *wen*, in order to construct an ecocritical lens for the new humanities—or, conversely, to consider the new humanities as exemplified through ecocritical thought.

Debates on the Humanities in Modern China

In modern Chinese intellectual history, two major debates stand out for their enduring impact on how the humanities have been conceptualized and contested.

The first was the “Debate on Science and Metaphysics” (*Kexuan lunzhan* 科玄论战) of 1923-1924, which unfolded amid the New Cultural Movement’s vigorous introduction of Western modern science and humanistic thought in the early twentieth century. At its core, this debate centered on whether and how Western natural science should reshape the Chinese worldview and, conversely, whether metaphysics or the humanities retained any intellectual agency in the face of the rising authority of scientific rationality. Although the debate produced no definitive resolution, it prompted far-reaching reflections on the nature, value, and future of the humanities and exerted profound influence on China’s cultural and social transformation.

The second was the “Great Debate on the Humanistic Spirit” (*Renwen jingshen da taolun* “人文精神” 大讨论) of 1993-1995, which emerged in the context of sweeping market reforms and accelerating globalization in the postsocialist era. Postsocialism ushered in the rapid expansion of the commodity economy and an increasingly pervasive consumer culture, placing significant pressure on the privileged status the humanities had enjoyed during the 1980s. Concerned by what they perceived as a widespread erosion of humanistic values, intellectuals undertook a collective effort to diagnose this perceived decline and to explore ways of reaffirming, revitalizing, or rearticulating the humanistic spirit under new sociocultural conditions.

The contemporary call to construct a “new humanities” in China’s academic and intellectual spheres

can thus be seen both as a continuation of these earlier debates and as a response to the distinctive sociocultural conditions of the twenty-first century. Today, the existential challenges confronting humanity have grown dramatically more complex: accelerating environmental degradation and ecological crisis, a widening divide between the Global North and South, the persistent threat of war and even nuclear catastrophe, and unprecedented ontological questions about what it means to be human amid technological developments such as artificial intelligence. Under the weight of these pressures, the notion of the new humanities emerges, burdened not only by historical legacies but also by the responsibilities demanded by present realities and uncertain futures.

Efforts to articulate and construct this new humanities continue to unfold in multiple, sometimes divergent, directions. Among these, one of the most constructive and urgent is ecocriticism. In the pages that follow, I examine ecocriticism's contribution to the new humanities by exploring several key conceptual clusters that engage both the humanities and nature.

Keyword Cluster I: Science, Humanities, and Nature

One of the defining conceptual constellations of the new humanities can be mapped as the triad of science, humanities, and nature. Compared with their "traditional" counterparts, the *newness* of the new humanities manifests in several interrelated respects.

First, in terms of objects of concern, the new humanities confront the rapidly shifting dynamics of the contemporary global economy, geopolitics, and cultural life, and—most significantly—the accelerating iteration and increasingly explosive growth of science and technology. These transformations have destabilized longstanding moral and ethical orders, generating mounting pressure for the humanities to respond, recalibrate, and renew themselves.

Second, in terms of developmental aims, the new humanities remain committed to the core values of the humanistic tradition—rigorous reflection and discernment, critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, and ethical self-examination—while also actively exploring new configurations and possibilities of value emerging under present conditions.

Third, in terms of methodology, the new humanities embrace innovation through openness: they cultivate interdisciplinary inquiry, engage with cutting-edge technologies, and seek to develop forward-looking theoretical frameworks grounded in global, planetary, and even cosmic perspectives.

Within this intellectual landscape, ecocriticism stands as a paradigmatic expression of the new humanities. Its objects of inquiry lie at the very center of the new humanities' concerns. Today, ecological issues have become the most urgent and unavoidable challenges facing humanity: accelerating climate change, rising sea levels, species extinction, soil depletion, pollution proliferation, and increasingly frequent pandemics. These ecological crises are inseparable from ethical dilemmas, political contestations, ideological structures, epistemological models, and affective orientations. Together, they challenge human rationality and conscience, reshape the relationship between humanity and nature, and call into question the fundamental meaning of being human. Such questions fall not solely within the purview of scientists; they demand sustained intellectual engagement from humanists capable of grappling with the deepest conceptual

and moral dilemmas of our time.

Methodologically, ecocriticism calls for dismantling rigid disciplinary boundaries separating the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Only through such integration can we adequately respond to the complex and entangled realities of the present—an imperative at the heart of the new humanities. As Miller and Spellmeyer (xvii, emphasis in the original) observe, “If the humanities are going to survive, they must be understood in a new way: not as a particular area of knowledge but as the human dimension of *all* knowledge.” For Chinese scholars, such an integrative intellectual orientation is hardly unfamiliar: traditional Chinese scholarship did not treat literature, history, and philosophy as discrete disciplines; rather, these domains were understood as inherently connected and often as different expressions of a single continuum. All fell under the capacious conceptual umbrella of *wen*, encompassing writing, cultural patterns, ethical cultivation, and civilizational form (which I will discuss in detail shortly). It was the development of modern Western scholarship—especially natural sciences—that introduced increasingly fine-grained disciplinary classifications, a tendency that intensified as knowledge expanded and technical specialization advanced.

At the root of this development is the evolution of Western “natural philosophy” into “natural science,” a process that Wu Guosheng (p. 65) describes as the historical “discovery of nature.” In this process, human beings carved out from the broader realm of *physis*—originally meaning “essence” or “the way things emerge of themselves”¹—a more specific domain of “natural objects,” and “thereby gave rise to a ‘philosophy’ and ‘science’ of nature,” referring both to an inquiry into nature’s essence and to the systematic accumulation of knowledge about it. The shared origins and eventual differentiation of philosophy and science in ancient Greece and beyond are woven throughout the intellectual history of the concept of nature, shaping contemporary negotiations—both tensions and collaborations—between the humanities and the sciences.

In ecocriticism, these negotiations manifest in the conceptual entanglements among “nature,” “ecology,” and “environment”; in the tension between humanistic affect and scientific rationality; and in the dense, multilayered meanings and extensions that the term “nature” has accumulated over time. In what follows, I examine the relationship between the humanities and the sciences within ecocriticism from two analytical perspectives.

First, the shifting orientations of the natural sciences and the humanities within the successive “waves” of ecocriticism. In tracing the field’s development, Lawrence Buell (18 and 19) famously described its first and second waves:

First-wave ecocritical calls for greater scientific literacy tend to presuppose a bedrock “human” condition, to commend the scientific method’s ability to describe natural laws, and to look to science as a corrective to critical subjectivism and cultural relativism.

¹ *Physis*, as the Greek counterpart to the Latin *natura*, describes the constitution and origin of complexes arising from themselves in various degrees of independence” (Dunshirn).

From the standpoint of second-wave science-oriented environmental critics like Heise and Hayles, by contrast, the borderline between science and culture is less clear-cut. Both would argue for “a scientifically informed foregrounding of green issues in literature” as Heise states, but they envisage science’s relationship to human culture as a feedback loop in which science is viewed both as objectified discipline and humanly directed enterprise, and the terms of scientific discourse have significant implications for environmental criticism of literature but do not serve as an authoritative model. The discourses of science and literature must be read both with and against each other.

From the outset, then, ecocriticism has grappled with the intricate tensions between the natural sciences and humanistic criticism in order to address the inseparable and deeply complex relationship between humans and the natural world. As ecocritical thought has evolved, this relationship has been continually recalibrated—from an early emphasis on the “objectivity” and “scientificity” of natural science as a guiding framework for humanistic inquiry, to a subsequent critique of these very notions, and finally toward a model of reciprocal exchange, cross-illumination, and mutual critique between science and the humanities. The ongoing tension and interplay between these two domains within ecocriticism stands as a key manifestation of the internal restructuring demanded by the new humanities.

Second, the repositioning of “nature” in ecocriticism. Ecocritics have long debated the concepts of “ecology,” “environment,” and “nature,” seeking to clarify the most fundamental terms in the field. For instance, Buell advocates the use of “environment,” arguing that it encompasses not only the natural environment but also artificial and urban environments—dimensions intimately intertwined with contemporary life. As he (Buell, p. viii) writes, “I believe that ‘environmental’ approximates better than ‘eco’ the hybridity of the subject at issue—all ‘environments’ in practice involving fusions of ‘natural’ and ‘constructed’ elements—as well as the movement’s increasingly heterogeneous foci, especially its increasing engagements with metropolitan and/or toxified landscapes and with issues of environmental equity that challenge early ecocriticism’s concentration on the literatures of nature and preservationist environmentalism.”

By contrast, Wang Nuo argues for the primacy of *ecology*, asserting that the *environment* carries anthropocentric connotations, whereas *ecology* emphasizes the equality of all living beings. After a comprehensive survey of Western ecocritical theory, Wang (p. 58) concludes:

The ideological roots of environmentalism lie primarily in “weak anthropocentrism,” or “enlightened anthropocentrism,” or “modern anthropocentrism.” [...] The ideological roots of ecology, by contrast, derive from the systemic, relational, and holistic perspectives of ecology, from the ecological thought of Rousseau, Darwin, and Engels, from Heidegger’s ecological philosophy, and from contemporary holistic ecological philosophies such as land ethics, deep ecology, and the Gaia hypothesis.

Wang’s view echoes Cheryll Glotfelty’s (xx) influential formulation: “in its connotations, enviro- is

anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment. Eco-, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts.”

Meanwhile, Timothy Morton argues that ecocriticism must abandon the concept of nature altogether, since the term is overburdened with cultural meanings that hinder scientifically grounded discussions of ecological issues. As he (Morton 2007, p. 1) puts it: “the very idea of ‘nature’ which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.”

I would argue, however, that ecocriticism should return precisely to nature and take “nature” as its conceptual center. After all, without nature, on what grounds could ecology stand at all? Compared with the more modern, scientifically inflected terms “ecology” and “environment,” the concept of “nature” spans antiquity and the present, carrying both metaphysical and empirical dimensions. In the West, the term “environment” emerged around 1600, deriving from the fourteenth-century verb “environ” (“to surround”). Yet it did not acquire its modern scientific meaning—“the aggregate of the conditions in which a person or thing lives”—until 1827, nor did it gain an explicit ecological connotation until 1956. The term “ecology” was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel (See <https://www.etymonline.com>) (Ökologie, originally *Oecologie*, 286), from the Greek roots *oikos* (house, dwelling) and *logos* (knowledge), denoting “the comprehensive science of the relationships of the organism to its surrounding environment, where we can include, in the broader sense, all ‘conditions of existence’.” Thus, contemporary ecocriticism is shaped simultaneously by a strong natural-scientific orientation and by the humanistic ideal of “dwelling poetically” on the earth.

In China, although the term *huanjing*—the counterpart of “environment”—appeared as early as the *New Tang History* (*Xin Tang shu* 新唐书, 1060) and the *History of the Yuan Dynasty* (*Yuan shi* 元史, 1370; He, Wang, and Dong, p. 2763), its modern usage was not introduced until the turn of the twentieth century through Japanese translations of Western terminology. The term “ecology” (*shengtai*) likewise entered Chinese via Japanese translation in the early 1930s (Ma, Hu, Zhang, and Zhou, p. 10).

The concept of nature (Chinese: *ziran*) carries a long and richly layered history in both Western and Chinese thought. R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of Nature* traces the evolving meanings of nature from ancient Greece to the modern West, demonstrating how each historical moment reconfigured its content and scope. In the Chinese intellectual tradition, however, the term *ziran* followed a markedly different trajectory over nearly two millennia, from the pre-Qin period to the late imperial era (See Ichida; Mizoguchi; Wang Zhongjiang). Only in the early twentieth century did *ziran* begin to acquire the connotations associated with the modern Western concept of “nature” (Tsai, p. 17). As Wu Guosheng (p. 65) observes in his comparative study of the Chinese and Western histories of the concept of nature:

Nature, as a distinct domain of beings, was carved out in the West through its identification with “essence” and “origin.” In contrast, in early Chinese thought, *ziran* consistently retained the meanings

of “self-so,” “self-generated,” and “self-sustaining,” and therefore never developed into a differentiated realm of natural objects distinguished from artifacts or human creations. Even during the Wei-Jin period [220–420 CE], when *ziran* occasionally approached the sense of “natural things,” the idea of a separate, objectified domain of nature remained foreign to the Chinese intellectual imagination. The absence of a scientific concept of nature in ancient China is not a deficiency but a different existential destiny.

Thus, to discuss “nature” in today’s Chinese context is inevitably to shoulder the immense weight of intellectual histories spanning antiquity and modernity and traversing multiple cultural traditions. Yet this burden should not prompt us to treat “nature” as an impediment to “properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.” On the contrary, the very longevity and richness of the intellectual history of *ziran* should be recognized as an invaluable resource—one that allows us to contemplate the entangled relations among all beings across far broader temporal and spatial scales. Why has “nature” served as the starting point for so many modes of human understanding? And how has it been invoked as a basis for rational cognition? If the core issue underlying the debate between “ecology” and “environment” concerns anthropocentrism, then “nature” places the human in a far more intricate and challenging position of inquiry. Yet it is precisely through this complexity that ecocriticism can unfold its immense richness and activate its profound potential. Is this not, after all, what the “new humanities” demands? Is this not the very foundation upon which the new humanities can claim its newness?

Keyword Cluster II: Global, Local, Nature, Nation

The new humanities advocates transcending regional boundaries and cultivating global—indeed, even cosmic—perspectives. At the same time, the local remains the most intimate site of human life, memory, and affective attachment, while the nation-state continues to serve as the most pervasive form of social organization and collective identity in the contemporary world. This tension constitutes a crucial dimension of new humanities research. The dialectical interplay between the “local” and the “global,” or the “planetary,” within ecocriticism offers a vivid illustration of this dynamic.

This dynamic is exemplified, for instance, in Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic’s (p. 6-7) observation that the third wave of ecocriticism, which emerged in the 2000s, “recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint.” Slovic (2010, p. 7) further explains that the most salient feature of this wave is that “global concepts of place are being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales, producing such neologisms as ‘eco-cosmopolitanism,’ ‘rooted cosmopolitanism,’ ‘the global soul,’ and ‘translocality.’” The most representative developments of this wave are Ursula K. Heise’s notions of “eco-cosmopolitanism” and the “sense of planet,” which stand in dialogue—and sometimes in pointed tension—with Tom Lynch’s formulation of “neo-bioregionalism.” As

two conceptual poles of this debate, Heise and Lynch² together propel the field toward an increasingly ambitious exploration of spatiality, scale, and horizon within ecocritical inquiry.

Within this dialogue, the deployment of “ecology,” “environment,” and “nature” as frameworks for rethinking ethnicity, nationality, and world-making has increasingly become a focal topic in contemporary scholarship. In the context of Sinophone literary and cultural studies, this trend can be seen in works ranging from Feng Tianyu’s historical survey of the interplay between ecological change and cultural transformation in the evolution of Chinese civilization; to Wang Ming-ke’s anthropological examinations of environmental influence on ethnic tensions, mobility, and communication along the “margins of China”³; to David Der-wei Wang’s studies of Nanyang (Southeast Asian) climate, literature, and culture⁴. These projects draw on a range of theoretical sources, including Julian Steward’s (p. 4) concept of “cultural ecology,”⁵ which examines the “ways in which culture change is induced by adaptation to the environment,” as well as the notion of *fūdo*—milieu or climate—developed by Watsuji Tetsurō and later refined by Augustin Berque⁶. Collectively, these works investigate how natural environments, geographical conditions, and climatic variations shape the formation and transformation of ethnic and national groups, and how processes of political, historical, and cultural change prompt migrations, reorganizations, and new articulations of collective identity.

Considering that the meanings and implications of *nature* and *minzu* (nation, ethnicity) differ substantially across Chinese and Western contexts, I have approached their relationship in ecocriticism from a comparative perspective. Drawing on contemporary Western—particularly Euro-American—ecocritical discourse, I have proposed several observations regarding the intersection of Chinese ecocriticism and questions of *minzu*.

First, in Western ecocritical discourse, the concept of the nation is primarily grounded in the key issue of race. In China, by contrast, “race” does not constitute the structural core of *minzu* (national or ethnic) issues.

Second, the racial framework employed in the West tends to produce what may be termed eco-racial essentialism, which manifests in the romanticization or demonization of particular racial groups when discussing ecological issues. China, too, has at times been subject to such Western eco-racial essentialism—while also engaging in its own forms of self-Orientalization—and has occasionally reproduced similar essentialisms internally toward its ethnic minorities, a dynamic that may be described as internal Orientalism.

Third, eco-racialism intersects with other social justice concerns—including gender equality, class inequality, age discrimination, and unequal access to education—forming a complex network of power relations. Consequently, ecological justice for different ethnic groups must be examined within these

² See Heise; Lynch

³ See Feng

⁴ See Wang Ming-ke

⁵ See David Der-wei Wang and Chia-Cian Ko

⁶ See Watsuji, Berque

broader structures of inequality.

Fourth, the roots of eco-racialism lie in the history of Western colonialism, the global historical condition that both compelled the emergence of the modern Chinese nation-state and shaped, to a significant extent, the configuration of China's internal ethnic relations.

Discussions of *minzu* in ecological writing, therefore, necessarily introduce a series of conceptual complexities: How should the English terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *nationality* be translated into Chinese? How do they correspond to *Zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese *minzu*) and *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minorities in China)? Are these terms truly translatable, and if so, under what theoretical assumptions and historical conditions? Beyond the linguistic dimension, these questions lead directly to broader sociopolitical implications. The modern framework of the nation-state—the fundamental political unit of the contemporary world—poses additional challenges. In what historical context did China's traditional systems of ethnic relations and tributary politics transform into this modern model? How have subsequent forces of transnational globalization further reshaped these relations? And how might these transformations be understood through the lens of human-nature relations, and, subsequently, through the evolving relationship between humans and society⁷?

To illustrate the complexities embedded in these questions, I have drawn on Jiang Rong's globally popular novel *Wolf Totem*, a work that proactively engages with issues of environmentalism, nationalism, ethnicity, and global politics. I have examined how the novel's circulation and critical reception in both Chinese and Western contexts reveal what I have termed processes of “the ecologization of *minzu* questions” and “the *minzu*-ization of ecological questions.” These processes reduce intricate contemporary economic, social, political, cultural, ethnic, national, and religious tensions into simplified ecological and *minzu* allegories—narratives that more readily claim the moral high ground or align with dominant forms of political correctness. As I have written, in the novel “ecological issues and questions of ethnicity and nationalism appear at opposite ends of contemporary Chinese reality. The former, as a form of symbolic currency charged with dramatic tension and international appeal, trivializes a wide range of complex economic, social, political, and cultural problems; the latter, grounded in highly universalized Western discourses of identity, becomes a convenient theoretical label, expected—undeservedly yet persistently—to function as a ready-made remedy for the above problems” (Gong 2022, p. 48-49).

I further revisited the question of *nature* and *minzu* in a recent contribution to a globally recognized anthology in ecocriticism. An intriguing discrepancy in understanding between Western editors and me—as a bilingual Chinese scholar—prompted deeper reflection on these conceptual issues. Because the chapter was written in English for a Western readership, I found several concepts I had assumed were already sufficiently clarified in multiple scholarly contexts—such as “nature” and *minzu*—still required additional explanation in order to be intelligible to the editors and their anticipated audience. Conversely, certain theoretical frameworks that I regarded as problematic or ill-suited for analyzing Chinese texts—particularly terms widely used in Western ecocriticism such as “ecoracism” and “postcolonial ecocriticism”—were encouraged, or even expected, by the editors. This dynamic vividly exemplifies the kinds of challenges—

⁷ See Gong 2022

and perhaps also the generative opportunities—that Chinese scholars often encounter when communicating across linguistic, cultural, and theoretical boundaries with Western academic audiences.

To resolve this tension, I carefully introduce and explain issues that fall outside—or even run counter to—these dominant Western frameworks, but do so gently and earnestly within conceptual structures more familiar to Western readers. More specifically, my chapter adopts “ecoracism” and “postcolonial ecocriticism” as points of entry, while simultaneously questioning the applicability of concepts like “race” and “postcoloniality” to the Chinese context. At the same time, I foreground the significance of nature and *minzu* grounded in China’s specific historical and cultural circumstances, emphasizing that any analysis of these issues must be situated within China’s concrete pursuits of modernity. In the chapter, I examine Alai’s novel *Empty Mountain* trilogy (also known as *Epic of Ji Village*), exploring how tensions between ethnic minorities and the Han majority—and between nature-worship and the will to conquer nature—help shape China’s narrative of constructing a united, multiethnic modern nation-state⁸.

The interrelations between natural environments and ethnic identities, the interplay of ecological change and shifting ethnic relations, and the parallel processes of shaping nature and reorganizing ethnic communities together illuminate the complex entanglements of power, affect, and human reflection. These dimensions provide Chinese ecocriticism with fertile ground for nuanced, contextually grounded inquiries into the relationship between nature and *minzu*. Yet for Chinese ecocriticism, it is equally crucial to look beyond the bounded sphere of Chinese ethnicities and the nation-state, and to cast its gaze toward broader regional, global, and even interstellar scales. Such outward expansion is not optional but an intrinsic requirement of ecocriticism conceived as part of the new humanities.

The Dialectics of “Human” and “Wen”: Nature and Civilization

The new humanities are oriented toward the future. Among the future-directed visions of cosmic space and deep time that animate discussions of the new humanities, none has been more influential than the discourse of posthumanism. Posthumanism emerges as a reaction against traditional humanism, particularly its embedded anthropocentrism. Likewise, the rise of the new humanities is driven by an internal imperative to renew—and, in some respects, to move beyond—the foundational assumptions of the traditional humanities. How, then, might the new humanities and posthumanism redefine or reposition the humanities? And what role does ecocriticism play in this reconceptualization?

As a mode of the new humanities, ecocriticism places at its core a fundamental challenge to anthropocentrism. This challenge reached its height in the “material turn” (also known as the “turn to things”) associated with the fourth wave of ecocriticism that began around 2008. The material turn signals a shift in focus from “the human” to the myriad nonhuman entities that constitute the natural world. As Slovic explains, this wave emphasizes “the fundamental materiality (the physicality, the consequentiality) of environmental things, places, processes, forces, and experiences.” He (Slovic 2012, p. 619) observes “a growing pragmatism in ecocritical practice”—a shift toward what he calls “applied ecocriticism,” which

⁸ See Gong 2026

seeks to apply ecocritical insights to “basic human behaviors and lifestyle choices, such as eating and locomotion and clothing and dwelling.”

The material turn foregrounds the agency and subjectivity of things, paying close attention to what Stacy Alaimo calls “trans-corporeality”—the interpenetrating, mutually constitutive relations between human bodies and the more-than-human world. Such a mode of thinking, she (Alaimo, p. 238) argues, “catalyze the recognition that the ‘environment,’ which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a ‘resource’ for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions.”

In this “material turn,” heightened attention to *things* in turn provokes a renewed inquiry into the *human*. Timothy Morton’s (2013, p. 1; emphasis is mine) concept of the hyperobjects—“things that are massively distributed in time and space *relative to humans*”—assigns a powerful form of subjectivity to nonhuman entities. Yet the “hyper-” in “hyperobjects” is meaningful only *in relation to the human*: it is human spatial and temporal scales that are exceeded. When these scales are surpassed, what becomes of the intrinsic conditions that define the human? This question has inspired a host of striking, even astonishing, theoretical propositions.

One such concept is atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen’s notion of the Anthropocene, introduced around 2000, which asserts that human activity has altered the Earth so profoundly as to constitute a new geological epoch. In contrast, American cultural theorist Donna J. Haraway proposed the Chthulucene in 2014, a speculative geological epoch meant to displace the Anthropocene. The Chthulucene envisions a world of multispecies co-becoming—indeed, of proliferating tentacular entanglements. It is “sympoietic” rather than “autopoietic”; it has no singular origin, no linear node; it is neither self-contained nor recursive; instead, it consists of countless points of contact that ceaselessly generate new filamentary connections (Haraway, p. 33). A third formulation, Jason W. Moore’s Capitalocene (2016), challenges the abstraction and essentialization of “the human” as the agent responsible for planetary ecological degradation. Moore (p.6) argues that it is *capital*—as a world-ecological regime—that has reorganized nature into what he calls “a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.”

Taken together, these theoretical developments fundamentally reconfigure the spatial, temporal, and ontological positioning of the human. Through them, ecocriticism—and the new humanities more broadly—are pressed to rethink what it means to be human in an era when human scales, agencies, and epistemologies are continuously exceeded by the forces and agents of the more-than-human world.

At another front, ecocriticism has also actively embraced the imagined—and increasingly imminent—conditions of the posthuman. For instance, in his recent ecocritical study *At Home in Nature: Technology, Labor, and Critical Ecology in Modern China*, Ban Wang devotes nearly a third of the volume to examining how science fiction reimagines nature. In another essay, I use Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*, the most influential work of contemporary Chinese science fiction, to explore the entanglement between nature and the posthuman: how the author imagines “posthumanity” reorganizing its social structures according to “natural law” on an unprecedented scale of time and space; how it overcomes “laws of nature” to create its most formidable weapons; and how its breathtaking epistemologies of nature enable the construction of

Earth, interstellar, and even cosmic engineering. Notably in the narrative, the carefully crafted “pastoral” miniature universe within the collapsing universes becomes the most exquisite—and most uncanny—symbol of posthuman relationships between humans and nature; and the launching of a human brain into interstellar space as a final gesture likewise poses—or perhaps even negates—the essential question of what it means to be human.

Ultimately, the posthuman and the new humanities—as well as the humanism that both interrogate—are engaged in the same enduring inquiry: what does it mean to be human? And how might humanity position itself amid radically different configurations of nature and culture?

Against this outward expansion into cosmic space and deep time, I would like to draw the gaze back toward the interior of the humanities themselves. The Chinese rendering of *humanities* as *renwen* (literally, “human” and “*wen*”) carries its own distinct logic. In traditional Chinese thought, the “human” must be anchored in *wen*—in continuous acts of writing, inscription, cultivation, and reflection through which individuals probe, pursue, and apprehend the subtle depths of the relation between Heaven and humanity (*tianren zhi ji*). *Renwen* contains both *ren* (the human) and *wen*—and *wen* is precisely the conduit through which “nature” and “civilization” are joined.

In his meticulous study of the concept of *wen*, Yu Laiming (p. 18-25) maps out its profoundly rich layers, which, as David Der-wei Wang (2017, p. 5) observes, span a remarkably wide range—“‘ornamentation,’ ‘pattern,’ ‘sign,’ ‘artistic inscription,’ ‘cultural upbringing,’ ‘civilization,’ and ‘a sign of the movement of the cosmos’.” Wang (2021, p. 30) writes more vividly in the Chinese version of his introduction to *A New Literary History of Modern China*, “Chinese *wen* has a long lineage, signifying patterns, forms, writing, temperament, culture, and civilization.... It is a continual process of inscribing and interpreting the nature of life, a process that originates from within and seeks diverse modes of manifestation (*zhangxian*) in the world. This process of manifestation is expressed in the body, in artistic forms, in sociopolitical life, and even in the rhythms of nature.”

To explore *wen* is therefore to reconnect “nature” and “the human” at the most fundamental level. Likewise, any reflection on the human inevitably draws in the entangled dynamics of “nature” and “civilization.” To rethink the humanities—its *ren*, its *wen*, the “human in *wen*,” or the “*wen* of the human”—is to revisit the intricate dialectics among nature, humanity, and civilization.

Ecocriticism, by its most basic and widely accepted definition, is the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glottfelty, p. xviii). In this sense, it is through literary expression—or, more broadly, through *wen*—that ecocriticism probes the relationship between humans and nature. What literature strives to touch and illuminate are the most intricate, shadowed, and deeply submerged dimensions of human nature and the natural world. It resists the simplistic displays of moral didacticism, the mechanical application of scientific conclusions, and the rigid arrangement of rational propositions. Literature possesses its own immense power to fashion countless forms that stretch from nature to civilization; it cannot, and must not, be reduced to an accessory of scientific argument or an instrument of ideological demonstration. In this way, ecocriticism—rooted in *wen*—is precisely what the new humanities require and exemplify.

As discussed above, ecocriticism as a mode of the new humanities is grounded in the complex dialectics among human (*ren*), text/culture (*wen*), and nature (*ziran*). For this very reason, while ecocriticism rightly challenges anthropocentrism, it must not—like certain radical strands—go to extremes by proposing to denigrate or eliminate the human under the banners of “biocentrism” or “deep ecology.” Such moves only entangle critics in logical contradictions, pitting humans against nature and even fostering forms of “anti-human” thinking. To recognize the significance of the human in ecocriticism is not to endorse anthropocentrism; rather, it is to enrich and deepen the meanings of both nature and the humanities. After all, without the human, how could we even speak of the humanities at all?

Under the new conceptual horizons opened up by the new humanities, the pursuit of new discussions such as “the nature of civilization” or “the civilization of nature” becomes particularly productive. This move resonates with my earlier proposition: to establish an ecocriticism that places nature at the center—the nature not stripped of, but enriched by, the cultural, philosophical, political, and aesthetic implications it has accumulated across time and civilizations. Such an ecocriticism has already moved beyond the scope of simple “nature writing.” It seeks, within all the forms of human civilization constructed through *wen*, to uncover the meanings and potentialities of nature.

Conclusion: The “New” and the “Old” in the New Humanities

Today, the rise of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research once again responds—at a deeper level—to longstanding calls to dismantle boundaries between academic fields. This development brings with it new perspectives and methodologies for identifying and addressing emerging problems. It demands the creation of integrative ways of thinking, fresh theoretical frameworks, and innovative methods; it opens new fields of inquiry and encourages engagement with new questions. Yet the “new” does not mean starting anew from a blank slate. Rather, it requires the revitalization of tradition and the forging of a path for the new humanities through the dialectic of inheritance and innovation.

As I have argued above through the example of an ecocriticism centered on *nature*, it is by reanimating the “old” meanings of nature that we can understand the sources and significance of its “newness.” The humanities are no different. Only by authentically grasping the deep tradition through which *wen* has mediated between nature and civilization can we fully understand how humans—across time and in relation to the myriad things of the cosmos—have continually inscribed, shaped, and reimagined themselves.

Thus, the humanities are at once natural, cultural, and fundamentally human. And the new humanities are indeed “new,” but their newness is inseparable from—indeed, rooted in—the very traditions that sustain them.

Funding: The research of this essay is funded by the General Research Fund (LU 13601423) of the Hong Kong SAR Government.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Gong Haomin ^{ID} <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0285-6649>

References

- Adamson, Joni, and Scott Slovic. (2009). "Guest Editors' Introduction: The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism." *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the United States* 34, no. 2: 5-24.
- Alaimo, Stacy. (2008). "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." In *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. 237–264. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Berque, Augustin. (2013). "Mesology (風土論) in the light of Yamauchi Tokuryū's *Logos and lemma*." In *Philosophizing in Asia*, edited by Tsuyoshi Ishii, Lam Wing-keung. 9–25. Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy.
- Buell, Lawrence. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Collingwood, R. G. (1976). *The Idea of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crutzen, Paul J. (2006). "The 'Anthropocene'." In *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, edited by Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft. 13–18. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Dunshirn, Alfred. (2019). "Physis [English Version]." In *Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie*, edited by Thomas Kirchhoff. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press. <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/oepr/article/view/66404/59195>.
- 冯天瑜 (2021): 《中华文化生态论纲》。长江文艺出版社。
- [Feng Tianyu (2021) *A Treatise on Chinese Cultural Ecology*. Changjiang Literature and Art Press]
- Glotfelty, Cheryll. (1996). "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. xv–xxxvii. Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- 龚浩敏 (2022): 《生态批评与“民族”: 从比较的视角反思》。《中国比较文学》第3期: 34-51。
- [Gong Haomin (2022) *Ecocriticism and minzu: a comparative approach*. *Comparative Literature in China*, no. 3: p. 34-51.]
- 龚浩敏 (2026): 《重构中国生态文学中的自然与民族》。《Routledge Companion to World-Literature and the Environment》。Routledge 出版社。
- [Gong Haomin (2026) "Reconfiguring Nature and Minzu in Chinese Eco-Literature." *Routledge Companion to World-Literature and the Environment*. Routledge.]
- Haeckel, Ernst. (1866). *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. Vol. 2. Berlin: G. Reimer.
- Haraway, Donna J. (2016). *Staying with Trouble: The Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University

Press.

何九盈、王宁、董琨 (主编) (2015): 《辞源》(第三版): 商务印书馆。

[He Jiuying, Wang Ning, and Dong Kun (Eds.) (2015) *Ciyuan (The Source of Words)*. 3rd ed. The Commercial Press.]

Heise, Ursula K. (2008). *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ichida Tomohisa (2006). “Zhongguo sixiangshi zhong ‘ziran’ de dansheng” (The birth of ‘nature’ in the history of Chinese thoughts). In *Zhongguo de siwei shijie (Chinese world of thoughts)*, edited by Mizoguchi Yūzō and Kojima Tsuyoshi, translated into Chinese by Sun Ge et al. 10–45. Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe.

Lynch, Tom. (2008). *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press.

马振兴、胡泽、张伟、周长发 (2017): 《中外文“生态学”一词之最初起源及精义考据》《生物学通报》: 52 卷第 11 期: 9-11。

[Ma Zhenxing, Hu Ze, Zhang Wei, and Zhou Changfa (2017) An etymological and definitional study of the term “ecology” in Chinese and foreign languages. *Bulletin of Biology* 52, no. 11: 9-11]

Miller, Richard E., and Kurt Spellmeyer. (2019). “Reading and Writing About the New Humanities.” In *The New Humanities Reader*, Sixth Edition, edited by Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer. xv–xxix. Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.

Mizoguchi Yūzō. (2014). *Zhongguo de siwei shijie (Chinese world of thoughts)*. Translated from Japanese by Diao Liu, Mou Jian, et al. Beijing: Sanlian.

Moore, Jason W. (2016). “Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism.” In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore. 1–11. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Morton, Timothy. (2007). *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press.

Slovic, Scott. (2010). “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline.” *Ecozon@* 1, no. 1: 4-10.

———. (2012). “Editor’s Notes.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 4: 619-621.

Steward, Julian H. (1955). *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

蔡英俊 (2017): 《“自然”概念的发展及其意义的转换》《政大中文学报》: 第 27 期: 9-44。

[Tsai Ying-Chun (2017) The concept of “nature” and its development in classical Chinese discourse. Bulletin of the Department of Chinese Literature, National Chengchi University no. 27: 9-44.]

Wang, Ban. (2022). *At Home in Nature: Technology, Labor, and Critical Ecology in Modern China*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Wang, David Der-wei. (2017). “Worlding Literary China.” In *A New Literary History of China*, edited by David Der-wei Wang. 1–28. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

王德威 (2021): 《导论: “世界” 中的中国文学》(王骁伟译)《哈佛新编中国现代文学史》: p. 23-55。麦田出版社。

[Wang David Der-wei (2021) “Daolun: ‘shijie zhong’ de Zhongguo wenxue” (Worlding literary China). Trans. Wang Xiaowei. A New Literary History of China: p. 23-55. Taipei Rye Field Publishing.]

王德威、高嘉谦 (主编) (2022): 《南洋读本: 文学、海洋、岛屿》。麦田出版社。

[Wang David Der-wei and Ko Chia-Cian (Eds.) (2022) Nanyang duben: wenxue, haiyang, daoyu (A Nanyang reader: literature, sea, islands). Taipei Rye Field Publishing.]

王明柯 (2020): 《华夏边缘: 历史记忆与族群认同》上海人民出版社

[Wang Ming-ke (2020) Huaxia bianyuan: lishi jiyi yu zuqun rentong (The margin of China: historical memory and ethnic identity). Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House.]

王诺 (2013): 《生态思想与生态批评》。人民出版社。

[Wang Nuo (2013) Shengtai sixiang yu shengtai piping (Ecological thought and ecocriticism). People’s Publishing House.]

王中江 (2014): 《自然和人: 近代中国两个观念的谱系探微》。北京商务印书馆。

[Wang Zhongjiang (2014) Ziran he ren: jindai zhongguo liangge guannian de puxi tanwei (Nature and humans: A study of the genealogy of the two concepts in modern China). Beijing: The Commercial Press.]

Watsuji, Tetsuro. (1961). *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*. Trans. Geoffrey Bownas. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

吴国盛 (2008): 《自然的发现》《北京大学学报》。45 卷第 2 期: 57-65。

[Wu Guosheng (2008) “Ziran de faxian” (The discovery of nature). Journal of Peking University 45, no. 2: 57-65.]

余来明 (2016): 《“文学”概念史》。人民文学出版社。

[Yu Laiming (2016) “Wenxue” gainianshi (A conceptual history of literature). People’s Literature Publishing House.]