

## ■ A Landmark of Ecocriticism in East Asia

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Review of *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia*, edited by Xinmin Liu and Peter I-min Huang (Lexington Books, 15 November 2021), 308 pp., ISBN-10: 1793647593; ISBN-13: 978-1793647597.

At a time when the global COVID-19 pandemic is still severe, the publication of *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia* is of special significance. Drawing on diverse sources, trends, and schools of thought associated with embodied memory, this anthology presents a comprehensive view of the therapeutic power of contemporary East Asian culture, and so it emphasizes Eastern wisdom and universal bio-ethics at the same time and is likely to redraw the map of global ecological culture.

As the anthology's co-editors Xinmin Liu and Peter I-min Huang point out, ecological culture in East Asia has grown rapidly since the 1990s. Based on long-standing spiritual resources and an emphasis upon embodied life, this culture reflects the integration of eastern thought with western theories, such as land ethics, process philosophy, feminist criticism, and environmental aesthetics;

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and it represents an eclectic theoretical family that emphasizes plurality rather than singularity of cultural phenomena and fluidity rather than fixity. In their anthology, the co-editors emphasize this culture by bringing together diverse critical voices. On the one hand, the contributors situate their findings in the web of world ecological culture, and on the other hand they engage with major forms of East Asian cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices inclusive of those that have influenced the twenty-first century environmental consciousness. The latter reflects a long history but also shows a contemporaneity that cannot be ignored. Re-interpreting Daoist, Confucianist, Buddhist, and neo-Confucianist thought, the contributors traverse media studies, food studies, critical animal studies, biotechnology studies, feminist studies, and so on. In the light of these wide research horizons, the ecosystems that the contributors write about are shown to represent not a synonym for Nature but rather a network encompassing both the natural and cultural worlds inclusive of the technological terrains of culture. Also, in their purpose to draw attention to the environmental healing power that is inherent in ecological culture in East Asia, the contributors elucidate texts that represent a wide range of aesthetic production, from science fiction literature to urban literature and regional literature. For readers who are used to equating eastern ecological culture with traditional spiritual resources, this book offers an original vision with enlightening power.

Inspired by the eclectic academic vision of *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia*, this book review also emphasizes the richness of contemporary East Asian ecological culture. This culture is both a boon and a challenge. Presenting both the diversity and complexity of this culture, Liu and Huang have chosen essays that coalesce around a main feature of this culture: the emphasis on embodiment and embeddedness and the far-reaching historical origins of such emphasis.

Since ancient times, East Asian culture has been a kind of embodied memory that reflects the relationship between love for humans and love for other life forms. As Tu Wei-Ming (杜維明) points out, traditional Oriental culture is an embodied culture that prompts “the sense of commiseration” (惻隱之心): people who regard themselves as embodied beings extend compassion to other embodied beings inclusive of other than human embodied beings and so cultivate their own sensitivity in such enterprise (Hung 209). This includes an understanding of the embodied self that is represented in ancient Chinese texts. For example, in *The Analects* (論語), the ancient Chinese word for “body” (身), which means “I” or “self” (爾雅 • 釋言), refers to the locus of not only human power but also natural power as well as to how the former acts on and is acted on by the latter (Hung 200). This notion is inherited by and developed under

Confucianist thought. In *The Book of Rites* (禮記), the body is the a priori subject that we must respect (敬身為大) and the cultivation of that respect (修身) is paramount. Correspondingly, moral reasoning is a kind of “embodied knowing” (體知, *tizhi*). Confucianism is about “cultivating the moral character of one’s embodied living existence” and such cultivation “involves the humanization of nature, or the understanding of that which ‘makes humans human’ and is inseparable from the physical body” (Li 1142). From the body that I am, I experience a trans-corporeal connection with the other living beings. On the ethical level, a kind of empathy that crosses species boundaries emerges: “When it comes to animals, if a gentleman (君子, *junzi*) has seen them living, he cannot stand to watch them die. If he hears their screams, he cannot stand to eat their meat” (qtd. in Chen and Wang 45). In Mencius’s view, animals have flesh and blood, as do human beings, so animals can also feel pain and should be objects of ethical concern. When people extend kindness to animals, humanity radiates its nature’s light. As represented by the words of another great Confucian philosopher, Wang Yang-Ming (王陽明), plants also are ethical objects:

The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body: Again, when he observes the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, he cannot help feeling an “inability to bear” the sufferings. This shows that his humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and other animals are not sentient beings as he is. But when he sees plants broken and destroyed, he cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that his humanity forms one body with plants. (172)

Similar statements can be found in Taoist, Buddhist, and Shamanistic texts. For example, in the poem, “Bird” (鳥) by Bai Ju-Yi (白居易), a famous Tang poet influenced by Buddhism, the poet expresses his trans-corporeal sympathy with the non-human life:

Who can say most living creatures are nothing?  
They have the same bone and skin.  
No hunting the birds in spring  
Nestlings look forward to their mom’s coming (my translation)

Although this text is more than a thousand years old, the ideas expressed in it reflect and resonate with the concept of trans-corporeality proposed by the twenty-first century ecocritic and ecofeminist, Stacy Alaimo (2). They have endured for centuries; they represent the notion that the human body always interacts with other embodied organisms, forming a “community of destiny”; and they have been passed down from one generation to the next and entered the veins of East Asian culture.

In contemporary East Asian ecological criticism circles, the concept of

embodied memory is witnessing an unprecedented critical notice. *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia* represents and reflects that notice. If human beings cannot learn to protect a tree, a flying bird, a swimming fish, then they cannot protect themselves, for those beings are integral elements of the web of contemporary global ecological culture. Therefore, when dealing with any topic or subject matter—for example, science fiction, visual media, biotechnology, or artificial intelligence—humans can value the embodied imagination and the therapeutic power that associates with it.

Indeed, the salient aspect of this anthology is the contributors' emphasis on the relationship between ecological culture and body philosophy, the latter of which highlights scholarship in East Asia that closely overlaps with ecological culture. Among the anthologies of ecocriticism that have had an important influence on the world today, there are not many that include or refer to “the body” as a key term. Under the influence of Cartesian dualism, many people understand the relationship with the earthly environment as one that is merely occasional and dispensable. Yet, “the age-old problem of conflict between body and mind that tortured philosophers” is not over (Fromm 32). With the globalization of western-based economics, politics, and culture, the path of disembodied instrumental rationality has become the dominant path and is the origin of ecological crisis. As people forget or dismiss the embodied imagination, they also forget that they are rooted in ecosystems, and so they treat other than human beings unsympathetically. In order to resolve this, we must reconfirm in ethical terms the physicality that we share with other living beings:

A person is not a mind and a body. There are not two “things” somehow mysteriously yoked together. What we call a “person” is a certain kind of bodily organism that has a brain operating within its body, a body that is continually interacting with aspects of its environments in an ever-changing process of experience. (Johnson 11)

As the Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton points out, “It is because of the body . . . that we can speak of morality as universal” (155). It is crucial to realize the fact that the human body has always been associated with “bodily natures.” Only when we realize that corporeality is what we share in common with the other organisms, we will find our proper place in ecosystems: “[Humans] are only companions or fellow-voyagers of other creatures in the evolutionary journey” (Leopold 103) and should give thanks to the work of other species as well as the work of members of their own species. There is constant contact and interchange between human corporeality and the more-than-human bodies of nature, which means that we can imagine human corporeality as being, in fact,

trans-corporeality. This imagination will guide people not only to protect non-human organisms but also to safeguard the well-being of their own species. For example, when East Asian ecological scholars discuss issues of food safety, they point out that food is not only a commodity in the supermarket, but also a gift from other lives, and that eating food—which is the process of transformation of plants and animals into human flesh—is one of the most fundamental and “most palpable” trans-corporeal processes (Alaimo 12).

In *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia*, the co-editors and contributors reconstruct the “web of life” that encompasses the human body. In this work of cultural repair and remediation, the authors draw attention to the resources of East Asian culture that in effect value the body. These resources include work in the area of body philosophy as well as work in the related areas of phenomenology, process philosophy, pragmatism, feminism, and so forth. In the area of body philosophy, scholars have been deconstructing the Cartesian dualism, and so re-laying the foundations for an ecological ethics. This is clearly what the editors of the anthology want their readers to see. An ecocriticism reader edited by Oriental scholars, *Embodied Memories, Embedded Healing: New Ecological Perspectives from East Asia* emphasizes the inherent richness and strength of contemporary East Asian culture. For all of us—biological citizens in the global village of Earth—this publication is greatly encouraging; and from an academic point of view, one can say that the publication represents a milestone in the study of East Asian ecological culture.

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