

Opening Ecocriticism's Sino-American Dialogue: An Interview with Lawrence Buell

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism, a critical tide rapidly spreading worldwide from North America since the last decade, brings a breath of fresh air to the otherwise rigid world of criticism. Ecocriticism's focus--the relation between humankind and the environment--causes literary critics to move beyond the socio-historical discourse of the text, extending the examination of structures of traditional literary classics and the strengths and weaknesses of current literary theory to the vantage point of earth's biosphere, thus regaining Nature's place long held *in absentia* in the literary and cultural subtext. In May, 2002, I met Lawrence Buell, Chair of Harvard University's Department of English, in Beijing. Professor Buell's earlier specialization was in American Literary Transcendentalism; his deep and penetrating studies of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and other writers provided a solid foundation for his shift to ecocriticism in recent years. Buell currently stands as one of the representative figures in American ecocriticism at a time of a burgeoning Chinese eco-literature. To facilitate an exchange, Professor Wang Ning of Tsing Hua University made some arrangements. The following article synthesizes an interview-discussion conducted over electronic mail between Buell and me.

KEY WORDS

Ecocriticism, Nature Writing, Environmental Issues



Wei: Professor Buell, thank you for agreeing to this interview. First I'd like to know how ecocriticism came about? I know your initial academic interest was Transcendentalism; I'm also aware that Transcendentalist-influenced writers such as Thoreau and Melville have become hot topics for ecocritical study. What is the internal connection between Transcendentalism and ecocriticism? As a renowned scholar of Transcendentalist studies, what special leverage, if any, do you have as an ecocritic?

Buell: Organizationally speaking, Literature-Environment studies originated within the Western American Literature Association. A group of its members were chiefly responsible for first putting the term "ecocriticism" into circulation, for founding the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment and its periodical, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (ISLE), and for hosting a series of increasingly international major conferences. Essentially, ecocriticism evolved primarily in engagement with Anglophone and particularly American literature, taking special interest in the nonfiction and poetry about the natural world, and in the promise held out by this writing of reconnecting modern humankind with the natural world. Current work is constructed both within and in reaction against the limitations of this critical agenda and its preferred canon. American ecocriticism has certainly been influenced by Transcendentalism; my own books are an example. Transcendentalism is an important filiation of European Romanticism, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Romantic Movement, broadly defined, was to encourage a kind of unprecedented respect for the natural world. In the United States, this point is most vividly illustrated

by leading proponents such as the Transcendentalist writer Emerson, and especially Thoreau. When I began studying Transcendentalist figures during the 60s and 70s, their theories of Nature were only one aspect of my research, but in retrospect I see that these early studies have been influential for my later ecocritical studies, particularly in its initial stages.

Wei: So the rise of ecocriticism has historical roots; it's a manifestation of the influence of Transcendentalism-Romanticism in our time. Perhaps the focus on the human world and the natural world from an ecological perspective began with Rousseau. Twentieth century's classical critical works such as Raymond William's *The Country and the City*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* should also be considered originary. Of course there must be other driving forces; I shall consult you below. Ecocriticism is still a fairly new subject in China; not a few scholars think of it as "another trendy topic." When probed for a definition of *what exactly is* ecocriticism, I have to admit it's not an easy question to clarify. When you were conducting a seminar in Beijing I'd wanted to ask you about the concept of ecocriticism but was pressed for time. The preface to Cheryll Glotfelty's *Ecocriticism Reader* defines it as "The study of the connections between literature and the environment." Do you agree that this is overly reductive and easy to criticize, or can you concretize it a bit?

Buell: As you've remarked, to the question of what ecocriticism "at bottom" means or should mean, there's no avoiding an ambiguous answer: ecocriticism means what its self-identified practitioners say it does. The movement's advocates often propose extremely inclusive definitions, as with Glotfelty's wanting to encompass any circumstance these two terms (literature and the natural environment) can be brought into relation. But it would be even more inaccurate to characterize the movement as an infinitely-expanding menu of various noncompeting, harmoniously co-existing possibilities. I doubt that those associated with it (either by personal choice or by attribution) will feel equally content to allow pluralism supercede the quest for consensus. So Glotfelty's definition is a starting point, though incomplete. The value

of her generalization lies in reminding people of these facts: within the last decade there has been a rapid insurgence of a broad, ever-expanding literary critical movement associated with environmental discourse; and while these literary critics originate from different backgrounds, they are more or less conscious of that common ground. Her definition doesn't tell us much about the movement's specific thrusts and methods, though. Below are some points worth noting:

1. Ecocriticism burgeons from a spirit of environmental praxis. In other words, ecocritics not only view themselves as people involved in academia, they are also seriously concerned about the current environmental crisis, and many—though not all—participate in movements to improve the environment. They also believe that the humanities, and especially literary and cultural studies, can contribute towards understanding and mitigating the environmental crisis. This is also one of the reasons why there is no clear boundary between ecocritics and environmental literature writers. Quite a number are both writers and critics; for instance, Gary Snyder transformed from poet to ecocritic, and John Elder, a literature professor, has turned increasingly to environmental narrative prose. Both fuse critical and creative in all their work.

2. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary. Those who merely proclaim an aesthetic formalism or the self-sufficiency of a field cannot aspire to become ecocritics. Ecocriticism absorbs interpretive paradigms from the fields of life science, geology, geography, developmental psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy (ethics, epistemology, phenomenology), history, religion, and gender and ethnic studies. In consequence, there have been great methodological differences among different ecocritics. For example, N. Katherine Hayles from UCLA and Columbia University's Ursula Heise both show strong interest in systems theory; Stanford University's Robert Pogue Harrison and Oregon University's Louise Westling both are drawn to phenomenology, and Westling's work shows a strong feminist commitment as well. Overall research trajectories vastly diverge, but there's one point of intersection: adhering to literary studies or literary

theory *per se* would not make an ecocritic.

The introduction above clearly shows that ecocritical theory cannot—at least not at present—be distilled from one kind of interpretive paradigm, as Edward Said said of “Orientalism” in post-colonial studies. To me, it’s a lot like cultural studies; we can only date it back to a certain era and a group of loosely-organized practitioners such as Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall. However, since it’s relatively a more recently developing field, in the next generation or so we might be able to determine, in retrospect, its inception in the 90s, and identify one or two important, prophetic texts.

3. The term “ecocriticism” has become increasingly complex with the movement’s insurgency. It was initially employed by literary scholars studying nature writing and nature poetry whose texts focused on the relation between human and the world of the nonhuman. The early ecocritics’ theoretical assumptions were relatively simpler than today’s. For example, early ecocritics tended to oppose the linguistic turn in structuralist and poststructuralist theory, pressing for criticism to reread environmental writing for its capacity to put readers “in touch” with nature. Here I should say that personally I believe that, within limits, the early ecocritics had an excellent point. Textuality theory certainly had the effect of overdramatizing the disconnect between represented visible and historical or experiential worlds; the problem with “first-wave” ecocritics lay in their tendency to over-emphasize anti-theory and anti-modernism. Nevertheless, the current scenario has changed. We are currently experiencing a “second-wave” of ecocriticism, with the premises below as its starting-point:

1. All forms of discourse can in principle be put under the sign of “environment,” not only in genres focused on the non-human world and the human-nonhuman connection.
2. The “environmental crisis” is not just a matter of threat to land or nonhuman life forms, but is a comprehensively civilizational phenomenon (in a variety of forms and including all the nations on the globe). Not only does it concern the minority of humans

who have interactions with nature, it concerns the daily experiential behavior of the whole human species;

3. Ecocriticism's mission lies not so much in encouraging readers to get back "in touch" with nature, but in instilling an awareness of the "environmentality" of human existence—humans are only one species inhabiting the biosphere: the awareness of this reality should leave its imprint on all intellectual activity.

Wei: Now I'm beginning to understand why ecocriticism, despite its inception a decade ago, remains a vibrant and formidable force capable of reinterpreting the text and other cultural productions—even if we "attribute" this to grave linguistic pressures and a rapidly deteriorating biological environment. But from your introduction, other factors have contributed to its inception and phasal development. Can you discuss more concretely its internal pressures, particularly its tense flirtations with literary theory? Among so many critical schools (such as feminist criticism, the New Historicism, post-colonial studies), what makes it distinctive? In other words, what unique position does it have in the world of criticism? Will it have enough staying power for the future?

Buell: As you say, the main driving force of ecocriticism is the increased daily awareness and concern of people towards the environment. But there are certainly other factors:

1. A "revival" of concern towards environmental issues in American and other Anglophone writing.
2. A More sophisticated theoretical understanding of this concern. In the past, the main camp of literary theorists constructed unnecessary obstacles, thereby preventing literary scholars from intervening in environmental issues and causing this kind of intervention to lag behind relative to other disciplines in the humanities such as history and ethics. Consequently, during the early development of ecocriticism, what I term as "theoretical" environmental concerns in reality plotted an anti-theoretical trajectory. It rejected all forms of post-structuralist theories

pertaining to textuality, seeing them with the potential to proclaim a linguistic manifestation or invasion of the natural world. Nevertheless, people quickly understood that ecocriticism's early posturing was a kind of over-reaction, a sort of naïve resistance towards theory. One of the goals of my *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* was to counter this kind of resistance with a more nuanced account of the relation between text and world.

3. Early American and British ecocritics were, to a great extent, steered towards a research emphasis on the genres of nature writing and (some kinds of) nature poetry by the ethics and politics of preservationism. It is now better understood, however, that modernization has made irrevocable alterations to the environment. Whether for better or worse, the environment has become increasingly mechanized, necessitating a reorientation of current ecocritics as critical interventionists in relation to modernization's aftermath. Such issues as social justice and equality (as well as the "environmental justice" movement) are receiving serious treatment from ecocritics. I endeavor to provide an analytical map of the trajectories of such an ecocritical mission in *Writing for an Endangered World*. Broadly speaking, this shift has tilted ecocriticism more in the direction of social and cultural theory.

Will this burgeoning of literature-and-environmental studies continue? Almost surely so, for at least two reasons. First, the field of environmentally-valenced inquiry is immense in duration and range. Humans are organisms with a sense of history, and have constructed themselves partially by battling inimical physical environments in the struggle for survival, so this perhaps may be manifested in any artifact of the imagination. From this it follows that the scope of the inquiry extends in theory from the oldest literary texts, such as the ancient Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, to the literature at the present moment—as

evidenced by the temporal horizons of environmental critical books like Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* and Louise Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World*, both of which start with *Gilgamesh*. Second, as human civilizations enter the *fin de siècle*, the "environment" looms up as an urgent, multifarious problem. If, as W. E. B. DuBois famously remarked, the key problem of the twentieth century has been the problem of the color line, it is quite possible that the most pressing problem of the twenty-first century will be the sustainability of earth's environment; and that the responsibility for resolving this problem—or series of problems—will increasingly be seen as the responsibility of all the human sciences, not just limited to specialized disciplinary enclaves like ecology, law, or public policy.

Wei: Your analysis shows that a burgeoning field of studies should be both interdisciplinary and liberal. If at all possible, it helps to view all sides of an issue from the perspective of related, or even seemingly unrelated academic disciplines with the aim of boundary integration. Literary studies, like humans, have been endowed with a richness of spirit that can remain vibrant only if unconfined within any one academic framework, thus "poetically inhabiting" the boundaries between academic disciplines. Its critical theories would be rich in diversity, and the definition of this organic richness would afford a pulsating aliveness to ecocriticism, rendering it more organic. In addition, ecocriticism concerns itself with the world outside the text, or, one can say, treats the world—including nature—as its critical text: this seems to me to constitute the reason for ecocriticism's initial departure from the realm of theory, only to take up, consciously, theory's weapons later on. Just now I enquired about the distinctiveness of ecocriticism in relation to other criticisms; now I'd like to point out their connections. In June 2002, after your visit to China, I met your colleague Homi K. Bhabha, another distinguished Harvard scholar, in Beijing. He said that you are good friends, and agreed that there are close connections between his post-colonial research and ecocriticism. I've always felt that ecocriticism, along with post-colonial theory and feminism, is part of post-structuralism: all three incline towards non-centeredness. I would love to hear you discuss issues regarding

ecocriticism's methodology.

Buell: I agree that ecocriticism, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism are interconnected, even though their respective practitioners are only starting to recognize that. In the first instance, they are all related to non-centered epistemological paradigms. Quite a number of second-wave ecocritics belong in the post-structuralist camp. But from the above's historical examination of ecocriticism's development, in my judgment first-wave ecocritics (i.e. ecocriticism preceding 1995) did not strenuously enough employ theory. We need to recognize the historical tension between "ecocriticism" and "post-structuralism" even as we recognize its inherent factitiousness. The same relationship exists between "post-colonialism" and "post-structuralist." You must've heard of the long-standing debate about whether the "post" in "post-structuralism" and the "post" in "postmodernism" are or are not the same. (For an eloquent presentation of the negative case, see K. Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*.)

But today it's become increasingly obvious that ecocriticism—we might term ecodiscourse analysis—is in reality an important facet in cultural studies. Like post-colonial studies, it arises from a world of brutal hegemony, driving us to question how we should comprehend history, and what we should be doing in the future. Thus, even though I'd like to add to the intellectual framework posed by your question, in general I feel that you're headed in the right direction.

Wei: Thanks for your encouragement, Professor Buell. I'm certainly focused on the current post-structuralist manifestations of ecocriticism and its structural strategies. I feel that western logocentrism and its logic of domination appear in different guises depending on different critical discourses—as Eurocentrism in post-colonial criticism, as patriarchy in feminist criticism, and as anthropocentrism in ecocriticism. With the rise of feminist and post-colonial criticism, critics have become increasingly aware of both the right and obligation to assume a larger responsibility towards man, society, and the earth. Ecocriticism's development reflects this gathering force. Its inception occurred when the daily destruction of the natural environment and polluted, foul air prompted critics to lift their

heads and gaze at the heavens. It is also inspired by feminist criticism and post-colonial criticism, with critics employing similar strategies to interrogate the relationship between man and nature. So it's hardly surprising that these three discourses are often stacked together, for they share the same targets of attack, and it's because of this that ecofeminism has a healthy momentum of development. As you once wrote in the special issue of *New Literary History*: "Today the impression seems to be gaining ground in some quarters that feminist scholarship is in retreat. In literature-and-environment studies, however, it is being practiced as vigorously as ever, and with increasing sophistication." However, deep ecologists are advocating another "centrism," that is, "biocentrism." I think this should be welcomed among ecocritics, since they've conceded to the position of non-human-centrism. Do you feel that deep ecology as a philosophy serves in support of ecocritical discourse?

Buell: To be precise, "deep ecology" and "biocentrism" are not quite the same thing. Their similarity lies in a shared belief of kinship between the human and non-human worlds. From this definition I agree that both support ecocriticism and call for a renewed examination between man and the natural world, as well as man's proper responsibility towards the natural environment. However, a "biocentric" environmental ethics first calls for an ecocentric philosophy, insisting upon "life" as the first goal of ethical concern, with humans as just one kind of species. In contrast, "deep ecology" tends to focus more on the umbilical connection between the human and non-human worlds, thus pointing towards a rediscovery of man's primordial condition before moving to environmental protection.

As suggested earlier, "biocentrism" in principle yields an easier interpretation than "deep ecology." "Deep ecology" may be understood as entailing any or all the following: 1. A strong theological tendency (a kind of pantheism); 2. A phenomenological discourse (focusing on environmental sensitivity or experiential meditation) deeply influenced by Heidegger and the perspective of a next-generation Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, who first coined the term "deep ecology"; 3. An emphasis on certain discourses of evolutionary biology and

genetics; for instance, Edward O. Wilson's concept of "biophilia." (Wilson probably would deny being a deep ecologist, but many find this aspect of his thought synchronous with deep ecology.)

Having said this much, I'll answer the question you posed—is deep ecology as a philosophy a kind of force supporting ecocritical discourse? If employing "deep ecology" intimates a sort of shallow mysticism, I would have to say, "No." But if it demonstrates the following points-- that we need to understand human beings as emotionally, morally, and biologically interdependent with the natural world (even if discounting spiritually—I understand that the term spiritually is important for some, while uncomfortable and questionable for others)--then I would say, "Yes."

Wei: I've noticed that non-fiction literary genres, especially American nature writing, have been a continual focus of ecocritical studies. Works such as *Walden* and the like are to a large extent richly poetical, but I'm still wondering if prose, in comparison to poetry or fiction, has a distinctive advantage in promulgating the essence of ecology?

Buell: Although Western ecocritics, myself included, have placed a special emphasis on literary prose, especially nonfiction nature writing, I don't believe that this genre is unique or unequivocally superior in portraying the environment. In principle, I believe that any artistic form can be a window to the environment. Furthermore, in actuality non-fiction nature writing has been restricted to a first person, more-or-less-subjective descriptive angle on the environment, while fiction, film, and drama do not have this limitation.

Wei: "Any artistic form can be a window to the environment" is so nicely put! Can we say, conversely, through the window of the environment we can see any kind of artistic imaginative form: this would eradicate the misunderstanding that many have towards ecocriticism, thinking that explicitly environmental literature remains always the sole object of ecocritical analysis. Should not ecocriticism be a kind of cultural criticism, as with its analysis of religion? Speaking of religion, I'd like to raise the point that ecocritics maintain an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. The prestigious collection of

seminal essays, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, opens with Lynn White Jr.'s famous public manifesto against Christianity. He notes: "Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. . . . Christianity not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature. . . . By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to be indifferent to the feelings of natural objects." The end of pagan animism allowed man to be the only speaking subject; the relationship between man and nature was reconfigured according to a theological teleology, and nature, under man's domineering discourse, became silent and degraded. Thus, according to White, Christianity lies at the root of ecological decay. However, many critics hold that Christianity affirms Man's divine mission as nature's steward, and according to my knowledge, the Church has made significant contributions towards the current environmental movement and is an important practical ethical force. So how does the American ecocritical mainstream view Christianity?

Buell: Your skepticism about White's sweeping claims is well founded. His critique of Christianity itself has been sharply disputed by scholars in history of science and religious studies. Nevertheless, there are still ecocritics who approvingly cite his opinions for two substantial reasons. First, historically speaking there are indeed some forms of Christianity that become inextricably intertwined with ideologies controlling nature and politics, especially when adopted as a nation-state's official religion. Second, early Christianity, when compared to Judaism from which it succeeded, believed that the natural world would be quickly destroyed by God, and for believers real salvation existed in the spiritual realm after death. Some conservative Christians still unswervingly adhere to this belief. These people are not particularly concerned about saving the environment. On the contrary, some look to environmental apocalypse even with hope, as the sign of the start of the millennium when God will return to the earth to rule it directly. But the great majority of practical Christians, and especially educated Christians, advocate the ethics of environmental stewardship. They derive this ethics from the story of Genesis in the Bible, where

God sent Adam as a steward for all living things, and not to dispose of them at will.

Wei: Furthermore, Christianity is a religion of many denominations, richly embodying a bioethics--from the compassion towards animals demonstrated by St. Francis in the Middle Ages, to the contemporary reverence for life of Schweitzer-- and certainly we could not lump them all together like White. Let's discuss a current hot topic. You must be aware of China's bitter struggle with SARS, a struggle that has not ended despite its victory at a certain stage. This kind of virus has affected the Chinese people's well-being in such areas as health, culture, education, economical development, and societal and political image from the end of 2002 to the present. I'd like to integrate ecocriticism with these current issues in our discussion. Like its English name (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), its impact upon our psychological wellbeing has been even more acute. Predictably, this crisis will have a long-lasting influence upon human lifestyles and attitudes towards nature. Has this shockwave reached American academia? How will it affect ecocriticism? What new perspective can it grant people in their understanding of nature?

Buell: I agree that the SARS virus may be a landmark event in ecocriticism worldwide in promoting global environmental issues across national boundaries and to reflect upon the symbiotic ties between people, and between humans and the non-human. But this is not a rare case in history. It's possible to generalize the analysis of SARS in the humanities. I can imagine that any ecocritical discourse pertaining to SARS would find its variant in sociological analyses of AIDS or any transmissible disease among people or between humans and the non-human. Every appearance of another "new epidemic" produces anxiety between humans and the environment. SARS illustrated the special trait in intensity but not in kind. First, its comparatively rapid publicization is a by-product of the ongoing information revolution coupled with commercial globalization; the discourses associated with it have been broader in scope and more intensive than otherwise. Second, SARS discourse has a distinctive aspect in China as a reflection of lifestyle traditions as well as

deep-rooted deficiencies in the communications system.

Wei: That's where I have definite reservations. Whether looking at it from the angle of contemporary Ebola disease or the historical smallpox or bubonic plague, the spreading of disease, while determined by biological factors, has, nevertheless, a seriousness directly proportional to the degree of human mobility. The more an area has been classified as having undergone globalization, the more severe the outbreak of disease. Imagine a Cantonese "atypical pneumonia" victim disseminating the virus as far as Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe only from an elevator in Hong Kong. From this it follows that SARS is unabashedly a "by-product" of globalization. Even though AIDS proves more fatal than SARS, there are certain pre-requisites for its dissemination; from a subjective point of view one could choose to avoid harm completely, and it follows a different paradigm of study from the viewpoint of sociology and ethics, whereas it is difficult to take comprehensive preventive measures against SARS. In this war without military weapons, some discerning observers in China have felt the wariness and fear among people. How long this passive psychology will last after "atypical" is worth our continual worry and vigilance. In fact, the classical law of ecology tells us that all things are interdependent, and the connections between humans are thus not an exception. No single individual can achieve absolute freedom without the initial premise of connecting with others. There's no need to elicit an example like, "A flap from the butterfly's wing in Beijing changes the weather in New York." Nature's ecology and human interpersonal ecology lie right by us. Of course you can "awaken" to the fact that "others are hell," but you can also accept your fellow human being as, in reality, a bud on the same stem, and learn to co-exist in an inter-connected world.

However, your point about the distinctiveness of SARS discourse in China should be emphasized by us Chinese scholars. Regretfully, as a nation possessing a tradition of venerating nature, we still have some failings which, when coupled with accelerating modernization, ironically display an ancient civilization harming the ecological environment. Of course this cannot illustrate the failures of traditional

Chinese ecological wisdom, but demonstrates a counteractive—or at least complementary—force in the process of modernization. In your paper you implied that ecocritics should seek wisdom from the cultures of the East (for example India). Your viewpoint would definitely be championed in China because we have a long history of eco-philosophy. Different from past cultural intellectual tides (like feminism, New Historicism), Chinese eco-literary studies, since its inception in the late 90s, did not follow closely at the heels of the West as green literary classics were being constructed. As a western scholar, how would you frame Chinese ecocriticism, and what recommendations do you have for your Chinese colleagues about beginning a constructive dialogue? We've already begun such a dialogue, haven't we?

Buell: I'm fully confident that Chinese art and culture's inherently rich resources guarantee a significant potential for the entry of Chinese ecologists in the movement. But I'm not very confident regarding its concrete steps, since, as you are aware, my expertise doesn't lie in Chinese literature, culture and history! Informally speaking, I would surmise that in Taoist thought (especially the sayings of Chuang-Tzu with their half-structuralist coloring) you can find an understanding towards value, and broadly speaking, a relative, non-binary, earth-loving mode of thinking that Chinese intellectuals have consistently employed since ancient times when considering the relationship between man and the physical world—forming a stark contrast with the Judeo-Christian tradition, especially Christian culture (not because Christianity has not addressed this issue, which is another matter altogether). Simultaneously, one must pay attention to the cultural geographer Tuan Yi Fu's cautionary description—"Our attitudes towards nature differ in ideals and in actuality." He emphasizes the discrepancy between environmental ethics and its implementation which exists in both the East and the West. I also know that my Harvard colleague Tu Wei Ming deeply believes that Confucianism is the key to understanding current environmental problems. I think that he takes a too anti-modernist position (hoping to disprove the "grand design of the enlightenment" in its entirety). Nevertheless, his placing an emphasis on Confucianism as one of the

resources for China's entry to ecocriticism is a right move.

I also want to say that China's unique experience in modernization will allow China's ecocritics to make outstanding contributions to the field. In recent years, the pace and scale of China's modernization has been unheard of worldwide. People can use 19th century England, Germany, the United States, and later Russia and Japan as standards of comparison, but China's situation is unique. China's singularity also lies in its advancement towards modernization as that civilization in world history whose high culture has the most ancient roots in place. But converting this into a force for ecocriticism is a question I'm leaving to you and your colleagues.

Wei: Thank you very much, Professor Buell. Your "informal remarks" from the perspective of someone outside Chinese culture, but as a scholar having a sense of responsibility towards the entire human civilization, is especially priceless for us. Certainly the accumulated riches of Chinese traditional culture provide the capacity for entering this movement, but as you've astutely noted, we have yet to reflect upon how to utilize this inheritance. I think it's extremely necessary to ponder: given that both Confucianism and Taoism have profound sayings about eco-philosophy and ethics, why is it that simultaneously massive construction projects have been carried out throughout the dynasties? In reality, before undergoing modernization, China's ecological resources had already suffered serious damage, and the gulf between idealism and reality was universal. How to translate China's relatively disconnected pieces of ecological thought into a critical force is, I feel in reality, the subtitle of the modernization of Chinese traditional discourse. Thus, the construction of a practical and open Chinese ecological literature—ecocriticism, will not only facilitate exchange and complementarity between China and the West, it will also provide a green platform in the dialogue between Chinese and Western literary theory. From which it follows that China's ecocriticism may make a contribution towards an ecological cultural trend during our age of globalization.