

Ecopractices, Self-Realization, and Interpretations of Tradition in a Chinese Ecovillage

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Sunshine Ecovillage in China, an organization striving to address environmental issues through a series of ecopractices for self-realization and interpretations of traditional culture. Initiated and guided by a committed and charismatic leader, the ecovillage promotes practices such as organic farming, meditation, and mindfulness, drawing inspiration from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Members seek to become ecological humans while saving the planet. They integrate individual ecological awakening with collective solutions, aiming to eliminate the dichotomy between humans and nature. By invoking Chinese classical texts and ideas, they carefully handle the relationship between their practices and sociopolitical ideology, serving as an example of the developing eco-movement in rural China.

Keywords: Organic farming, traditional culture, mindfulness, ecological awakening, Confucianism, Daoism

The ecological human is one who has the ability to save the world and at the same time perfect his or herself. The two are not in contradiction, but completely united. If we want to pull ourselves out of the industrial world, the first step is to return to what it means to be human, we must understand where mankind is situated. The position of humans is between Heaven and Earth, neither higher than Heaven nor lower than the Earth.¹

This is how one of the ecovillage founders in China, Huang Zheng, has formulated the pivotal role of the ecological human situated between Heaven and Earth in a future sustainable world. In the past decade, a group of ecovillage explorers have emerged in China. Most of them come from a life in one of China's cities resenting what they see as an efficiency-seeking, introspective type of life and work in the cities. Usually these members of ecovillages feel anxious about the destruction of the climate and ecological environment caused by consumerism brought about by today's fast-developing industrial society. They are also worried about their own

lifestyle and their future self-realization in such a society. In Sunshine Ecovillage, or *Sanshenggu shengtaicun* (三生谷生态村) in Chinese, the leader and members are seeking to salvage their mental health, and, at the same time, they aim to save the planet from ecological destruction. Hence, they gather in the countryside and join this ecovillage to seek the realization of becoming an ecological human in the “unity of Heaven and humans” (天人合一), where humans are “neither higher than Heaven nor lower than the Earth,” and to explore an ecologically sustainable way of life. The Sunshine Ecovillage, initiated by Huang Zheng in 2015, is one of the earliest international ecovillages in China. Huang Zheng employs ideas and concepts from ancient Chinese philosophy and religions, referred to as “traditional culture” (传统文化) and “Eastern wisdom” (东方智慧) to bolster and legitimize an eco-movement in the mountains in Zhejiang province, China. We do not profess to be able to represent the entire rural ecovillage movement in China with this analysis, but we do believe that an analysis of the conditions in and around Sunshine Ecovillage has real potential to describe and represent aspects of an emerging grassroots eco-movement in rural China, and thus also tell a story about sustainability, transcendence and eco-initiatives in Asia.

Ecovillage construction started in China in the 1990s. Initiated by the central government, it has been mainly concerned with eco-agricultural projects in rural areas and the economic development of townships, serving what is referred to by the government as “rural urbanization” (农村城镇化) and “new rural construction” (新农村建设; Zhang 2012, 13). This diverges from the background of the global ecovillage movement, which is usually regarded to have started in 1995. That year, the Findhorn Community in Scotland held its annual autumn conference on ecovillages and sustainable communities. After the conference, most of these communities started to refer to themselves as ecovillages and formed the Global Ecovillage Network, which linked hundreds of small projects around the world together (Jackson 2004; Joubret and Dregger 2015). In this global context, since the mid-1990s, ecovillages have been understood in terms of four dimensions of sustainable development: social, cultural, ecological, and economic (Bates 2003; Jackson 1998). Sunshine Ecovillage is one of the earliest cases in which these ideas from the global ecovillage movement were brought into practice in China. The founder, Huang Zheng, adopted the framework of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) and joined it formally in 2016, combining its principles with his own interpretation of what he sees as “Eastern wisdom” and “traditional Chinese culture” to explore sustainable ways of living in the contemporary Chinese sociopolitical context. In their ecopractices, the teachers and members of Sunshine Ecovillage rely on selective and hybrid interpretations of excerpts and passages from classical texts, and on ideas from different schools of thought and philosophy in ancient,

pre-modern and early modern China to practice self-cultivation in daily life through meditation, mindfulness, and bodily exercises. A central idea in their practices is “refinement of the mind through practice” (藉事炼心), through which they develop embodied ecological learning and transformation so as to realize the awakened state of what they refer to as the ecological human (生态人) through the power of awareness (觉知). To respond to the global ecological crisis, they invoke the existence of an “Eastern wisdom” current in today’s China, inherited from ancient Chinese philosophical and religious traditions. Selective ideas and concepts from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are invoked from ancient texts to attempt at generating an indigenous eco-philosophy in China. Through ideas like “the Way models itself on what is naturally so” (道法自然, translation adopted from *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* 1984, 82) and “the unity of Heaven and humans” associated with different schools of thought in ancient China, a fundamental unity between the individual, the family, the country, and nature at large is ontologically constructed.

In this chapter, we will not engage in-depth with these interpretations of early Chinese philosophy. It suffices here to point to the fact that analyses of the ancient Chinese (mainly fourth and third centuries BCE) concepts of Heaven (天), humans (人), the Way (道) and human nature (性) have a long tradition within sinological scholarship. Scholars’ writings expound changing and very complex interpretations of and interrelations between these central philosophical terms (e.g., Graham 1989, 107–37 and 370–82). When Huang Zheng refers to “traditional culture” and “Eastern wisdom,” however, what he and others imply is that these invariable concepts, for instance the “unity between Heaven and humans,” are the foundation of all main schools of philosophy in China regardless of time and historical development.

Through their interpretation of “traditional culture,” Huang Zheng and the members in Sunshine Ecovillage integrate the “ecological awakening” (生态觉醒) of the individual with collective solutions to the eco-crisis, seeking to eliminate the dichotomy both between humans and nature, and between the immanent and the transcendent. In this process, these ecovillage practitioners are, as we will show in this article, also faced with challenges from local villagers, ecovillage visitors and local government officials, and even with frictions between themselves. They need to constantly and strategically employ their interpretation of traditional culture to respond to their individual sense of crisis, to buttress the national ideology, and to explore legitimized ways of practice in the domestic sociopolitical context.

Besides Sunshine Ecovillage, there are several other similar organizations in China, such as Qiandao Lake Ecovillage, Liyang Ecovillage, Shanghai Yungu Farm, and Chengdu Huadao Community. They often have people traveling and exchanging ideas between them, but they also each have their own focus on essential traits in their practices, such as traditional Chinese medicine, organic farming, and

mindfulness. The reason why we chose Sunshine Ecovillage as a case study for this chapter is firstly because it was one of the first to be initiated in China and has persisted to this day. Secondly, the founder and the members of this ecovillage have organized conferences such as the “Sunshine Ecovillage International Ecovillage Forums” in 2015 and 2016, and the “Ecovillage and Eco-civilization Forum” in 2017, thus attracting much international and domestic attention. These forums helped to build a network of people with similar concerns about sustainability in China. Thirdly, it is of interest to observe how the development of Sunshine Ecovillage has gone from internationalization to localization. After initially introducing the Ecovillage Design Education Program (Gaia Education 2012), they have increasingly combined ideas from their interpretation of “traditional Chinese culture” with similar statements about Chinese tradition voiced in official discourse. Over time they have turned their focus to the practices of what they regard as the quintessence of traditional culture in China, while also carefully managing the relationship with neighboring local villagers and the local government. At the practical level, Sunshine Ecovillage promotes learning of eco-knowledge and skills such as vegetarianism, farming, and sustainable design; at the spiritual level, it teaches ideas from the Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist classics mixed with deep ecology and postmodern process philosophy from the West.

Between 2019 and 2024, the authors of this article conducted ethnographic fieldwork combined with textual research in, around and related to Sunshine Ecovillage. We observed the daily work, practices and routines in the village and have conducted interviews with the leader, members, volunteers, visitors, new and old villagers, and government officials in the area. We have become acquainted with these eco-villagers, their ideas, their practices, and their aspirations and frustrations. We have aimed at analyzing their motivations, their solutions, their sources of inspiration, and their spiritual and transcendent practices. We have also sought to better understand the social impact and political implications of their practices, and how an ecovillage of this kind juggles the sociopolitical context in contemporary China. More specifically, we have endeavored to understand how the ecovillage explorers deal with questions of local governance and relationships to neighboring farmers and villagers. Finally, we have also wanted to identify to which extent Sunshine Ecovillage have succeeded in attracting attention and support both domestically and internationally. In this chapter we present and analyze Sunshine Ecovillage as an example of how the eco-movement is developing in China’s countryside and what the implications and potential effects of this movement are. More generally, we aim to contribute to an understanding of how otherworldly powers and transcendent ideas are employed and transformed into ecological practices in Asia today.

The History of Sunshine Ecovillage and Its Founder

Sunshine Ecovillage is situated as an integrated part of Xuling village in Qiantan township, Jiande district, administratively governed under Hangzhou city in Zhejiang province. Xuling is a so-called “hollow village” (空心村) not far from Hangzhou, with beautiful natural scenery, but without convenient transport or good infrastructure. It used to be a lively mountain village but today there are only approximately thirty elderly people left. In addition, about thirty new villagers have moved into the village in recent years. According to the villagers’ own descriptions and local chronicles, the population began to rise in the 1960s. In the early 1980s, the population peaked at 663 inhabitants (*Xuling Zhi* Compilation committee 2013, 46). After the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening Up (改革开放), with the liberalization of restrictions on urban and rural mobility, the problems of poor transport, lack of job opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and poverty in Xuling village gradually came to the forefront, and the population of the village slowly diminished. The Wahaha Mineral Water Factory started operation in the village in 1994, and employed more than one hundred villagers. However, the factory had closed by 1997 (*Xuling Zhi* Compilation Committee 2013, 93), depriving young villagers of the chance of local employment. The dismantling of the village-run primary school after it was merged into the township’s central primary school in 2000, and the implementation of the local government’s 2013 initiative to encourage the villagers to relocate to the township of Qiantan to alleviate poverty, all aggravated the process of Xuling’s “hollowing out.” Young people going out to work to seek opportunities for making a living and get education, and some elderly people going to the city to take care of their grandchildren further exacerbated the loss of population in the village. By 2013, there were nearly six hundred registered villagers but only approximately thirty elderly villagers actually lived in the village at that time. However, Xuling’s geographical location and natural environment provide natural conditions for eco-enthusiasts: it is located 418 meters above sea level, surrounded by mountains and rich in wildlife; traffic is inconvenient, there are no factories, and the terraces are not conducive to large-scale mechanized planting and harvesting. The risk of contamination by pesticides and fertilizers is minuscule, and the soil is considered to constitute a good microbiological environment, thus making it an ideal choice of location for the Sunshine Ecovillage, also attracting a small group of new villagers.

The Chinese name of Sunshine Ecovillage, *Sanshenggu* (三生谷) was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the term *sansheng* (三生) refers to the three Chinese terms for ecology, life, and living (生态, 生命, 生活), indicating the goal of ecological practice and living in the ecovillage. The character for the number three, also corresponds to a philosophical concept in the Daoist classic *Daodejing* (道德经) where



Figure 3.1: Xuling Village situated on the side of the terraced mountains where the Sunshine Ecovillage is located. (Photo by Rune Svarverud)

three is expounded as the number that gives birth to all things in nature: “The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures” (*Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* 1984, 103). Finally, the English name Sunshine Ecovillage is adopted presumably because the pronunciation of *sansheng* in Chinese resembles “sunshine” in English.

Huang Zheng is the main initiator of the organization and is now a mentor, and for all practical purposes, its leader. Born in 1976, Huang Zheng is a former pharmacist who worked for a large pharmaceutical company in Shanghai after graduating from a university in Hangzhou. Dissatisfied with the unhealthy living conditions in big cities, with working for a big enterprise, and with the crisis in the company’s operation, he finally chose to leave Shanghai. Huang Zheng and his wife established a tea house in Hangzhou which they ran for more than ten years, while at the same time exploring traditional and ecologically sustainable ways of life in Hangzhou and the nearby countryside. With support from the deputy mayor of Qiantan township in 2015, Huang Zheng initiated Sunshine Ecovillage: he registered it as a social enterprise aimed at solving social problems and promoting public welfare rather than pursuing profit maximization. Due to firm support and recommendations from the deputy mayor, the local government agreed in 2016 to allow Sunshine Ecovillage to use and renovate an old house in Xuling village for that purpose. In the same year, Sunshine Ecovillage successfully joined the GEN and became one of the ten projects enlisted in mainland China (GEN, n.d.). As the ecovillage organization was approved by the government, it had initially formulated an economic cooperation plan with local villagers and regularly organized

activities. After a change of government leadership two years later, however, the new government started questioning this kind of ecovillage design. Since then, Sunshine Ecovillage has had less cooperation with the government and has become more independent, for better or worse, as we return to below. However, the road sign saying “Xuling International Ecovillage” at the foot of the mountain has not been taken down.

Member Enrollment in the Eco Academy

The Eco Academy (生态书院) forms the most important center of activities in Sunshine Ecovillage, through which Huang Zheng promotes his lofty goal of furthering the ecovillage movement in China. This is mirrored in the words of one of their younger members:

We hope that there will be more and more ecovillages in China, blossoming all over the place, but it's not necessarily us doing it, it's our influence spreading out, or the seeds we scatter ... The overall goal is that we hope to spread the ecovillage concept (Xiao Tan).

The Eco Academy is where the members and visitors can meditate, study, practice awareness, and learn about ecology and sustainability. Sunshine Ecovillage is not a large organization. It is usually inhabited only by the founder's family and ten or so more student-members (学员)² who live in there year-round. Hundreds of other participants have come on short-term visits for workshops and activities during this time. There are also nearly thirty new villagers living in the surrounding Xuling village, some of whom previously stayed in Sunshine Ecovillage as members, volunteers, and visitors but had left the ecovillage for various reasons. Additionally, some have also learned about the place and have rented houses in Xuling because of the beautiful sceneries marketed through the ecovillage's online promotion material.

Inspired by the Global Ecovillage Network, Sunshine Ecovillage is committed to exploring ways of living and forms of agricultural production that are different from the urban and industrialized world, re-establishing what Huang Zheng regards to be an impaired relationship between human beings and nature. The Eco Academy is the main way to recruit new members. The goal is to nurture its members to become ecological humans, creating a community that can flourish and spread in the future. At its inception, Sunshine Ecovillage recruited large numbers of volunteers to Xuling and gathered a group of practitioners in China who shared a common concern for sustainable development through methods such as traditional Chinese medicine, natural farming, permaculture sustainable design,



Figure 3. 2: The interior of the Eco Academy: A library of books on sustainability and Chinese philosophy, and the Chinese character for “good fortune” (福). On the wall to the right, a classical painting of Confucius. (Photo by Rune Svarverud)

heated *kang*-beds (火箭炕), rammed-mud architecture, mindfulness practice, and eco-leadership development courses. A former volunteer estimated that at its peak in 2016 and 2017, hundreds of people visited this ecovillage each month. Through the richness of practical activities and curriculum design, Sunshine Ecovillage developed and enriched Gaia’s four keys of Ecovillage Design Education (Gaia Education 2012, 3). Participants receive an EDE certificate of completion, which Huang Zheng claims is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. From the statistics of past activities, we can see that its curriculum and workshops were rich in its early years, and during the six-month period from March 4 to September 22, 2018, they organized a total of thirty-nine activities ranging from one to seven days each, including workshops, outings, and expert lectures. With the passing of the boom of volunteers and visiting groups during the first two years, as well as the failure to gain the trust of the local leaders in power due to a change of government, and the gradual reduction of visitors due to the restriction of movement of individuals during the pandemic starting in early 2020, the Sunshine Eco Academy has become the center of the ecovillage’s practice. To further promote the Eco Academy, Huang Zheng hired an American eco-philosopher, John B. Cobb Jr., and a professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC (National Academy of Governance), Zhang Xiaode, as two honorary deans of the academy.

Since 2019, the academy has been enrolling between ten and fifteen new members per year in its two-to-three-year program and practice, while some people

leave halfway and the number of members who stay for a longer time each year is only around five. So, the number of long-term members in the ecovillage is maintained at around ten to fifteen, mainly young people between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. In addition to joining as an Eco Academy member, there are options for short-term courses and activities posted on social media that people can sign up for according to their personal interests, which also attracts larger groups of visitors. Short- and long-term engagement in Sunshine Ecovillage with its basis in “tradition” is attractive to many discouraged Chinese youths who seek a deeper meaning in life.

Since childhood, I have been pondering the following: kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, university, job search, promotion, buy a house, buy a car and get married—this resembles people in an assembly line that is called life. We cannot make our own decisions, and we cannot stop. This question has recently been echoing again in my head: what is this life actually for? Perhaps you are someone who is not satisfied with just doing environmental work, taking superficial ecological actions; maybe you hope that there is an ecological organization to promote a truly ecological cause—one with a systematic way of thinking and a vision that makes you want to build an “ecology” and achieve sustainable development. Globalization under the command of Western philosophical and economic theories has brought about global ecological, spiritual, economic, and social crises, while Eastern wisdom contains the most valuable cultural resources for sustainable development (Shutong 2024).

This quotation is taken from the enrollment information for the Sunshine Eco Academy in 2024, when they were about to welcome the sixth group of new Eco Academy members. The ecological crisis is apparently not the only aspect of Sunshine Ecovillage that is attractive to prospective members—so is a personal crisis of the mind (心). That is why the academy also promotes “ways of mind-living” (心活法). Wang Bo, who came to the ecovillage after graduating from university, troubled by the anxieties resulting from long-term studies, disturbing prospects of further education and the job search after graduation, was hoping to find inner peace and mutual respect among people. Shao Long worked in a property company and was tired of the absence of happiness brought about by the pursuit of economic success, so he resorted to mindfulness to feel the happiness of village life. Lingling could not cope with the complexities of human relationships and the “separation of mind and body” (身心分离) caused by work in the city. Yu Nong studied for a master’s degree in sustainable development in Paris and worked on it with deep ecological anxiety in Beijing and could not bear to see the destruction of sustainability in urban life. Xiao Bing was betrayed by a business partner and had been penalized for copyright issues, so he engaged in mind-and-body practices and came to terms with himself in natural farming. Over the past eight years, there have been many such cases in the ecovillage, each with their own story about their dissatisfaction

with their previous lives, jobs and selves, and each with their own ideals for an ecologically sustainable future. They all came to this village to explore physical, mental, and ecological sustainability by practices which the ecovillage defines as “Eastern wisdom” inherent in “traditional culture.” Strikingly, however, very few of the members of the Eco Academy seem to have come to the ecovillage primarily because of their engagement with ecological issues. Then, what are these practices and perspectives on life that attract youth to Sunshine Ecovillage? In the following we will explore the life, practices, and activities in the ecovillage.

Meditation and Mindfulness: Seeking Awareness in Daily Life Practice

Every morning at 6:30 a.m., members gather on the second floor of the Eco Academy building to meditate. There are forty minutes of sitting meditation with legs crossed on a mat, breathing in the early morning mountain air, and the sounds of the singing bowl (颂钵) like a buzzing in the brain signaling the beginning and end of the meditation. For beginners, the first things they sense are the birdsongs in the mountains, the minuscule movements of insects and small animals, the flowers and trees in the wind and rain, then the air around them, their own body, blood, breath, and heartbeat, and their deepest thoughts, and finally, some fatigue at the end of the session. At the end of the meditation session, passages from one of the ancient Chinese classics are read aloud in unison. There are also members of the academy who arrange their own time and place to meditate for another thirty to sixty minutes every day to train their awareness. When Xuling’s elderly villagers observe this kind of behavior, they often assume that the academy members are performing some kind of illicit religious ritual and feel worried and suspicious.

Huang Zheng referred to mindfulness as a “deliberate, present-focused, non-judgmental awareness,” during the opening ceremony of the Eco Academy in 2024. Obtaining awareness is one of the goals of the practices at Sunshine Ecovillage—the perception of one’s present state of body and mind. In addition to having a teacher to guide them during meditation, the academy also offers the participants many workshops involving mindfulness, such as playing the ancient Chinese music instrument *guqin* (古琴), attending “immanent life (内在生活) camps,” hiking, and taking part in reading clubs, in order to train their awareness through self-mastery and collective learning and practice. After morning meditation, they often practice *qigong* (气功) or other mind-body exercises, and then the day starts with a mindful introduction to breakfast.

The growing of rice and of grain—think of it whenever you dine; remember how silk is obtained, which keeps you warm and looks fine. Don’t pick and choose what you eat, and

don't eat too much. I am grateful to Heaven and Earth for nourishing all things, to my country for nurturing and protecting me, to my parents for raising me, to my teachers for guiding me diligently in my learning, to my classmates for caring for and helping me, to the farmers for working hard, and to my fellow members for cooking with care. I will be aware of my posture and breathing and of my chewing and swallowing. I live in the here and now. I am grateful! (Pre-meal words of thanksgiving—mindfulness breakfast)

The mindfulness breakfast takes place after members have chanted the above words of thanksgiving in chorus. The content of these words of thanksgiving incorporates food conservation, valuing of labor, Confucian benevolence and filial piety, patriotism, and training of awareness.

Mindfulness serves as the central value of education in the ecovillage. Huang Zheng is critical of the unsustainable way of life brought about by the endless pursuit of money and the efficiency of industrialism and consumerism and sees the global ecological crisis as the result of what he calls the “efficiency society” (效率社会). The solution he proposes is to focus on ecology, life and living (三生), and in that way cultivate the individual to become an ecological human representing the unity of Heaven and humans. Through mindfulness and meditation, Huang Zheng offers a venue for the members to interact with the eco-values in Chinese tradition and at the same time tackle issues of personal distress and anxiety. Reaching this status requires not only to study texts on “traditional culture” through books in the classroom, Huang Zheng claims, but also includes the need for embodied practice in daily life achieved through “refinement of the mind through practice” (藉事炼心).

Refinement of the Mind through Practice: Cooking and Farming

Life and practice in the ecovillage are not always a walk in the park. The lack of supplies and personnel, organizing activities to cope with the crowds of people coming and going, and the collaboration and cooperation among the members often put a lot of strain on the members. For example, in this kind of communal living, the problem of a dozen or so people taking turns cooking causes difficulties for the members, and if there are guests and team visits, the members whose turn it is to cook will face even greater pressure. Sometimes there are also members who simply forget their duties to cook and at other times there are a lack of ingredients for cooking, adding to the tensions. Some of the short-term volunteers complained directly about the unfairness of this kind of rotation and the chaos of management, and some even left for this reason; there were also members who had a hard time tolerating the filthiness of the communal space caused by the rotation of duties. The thanksgiving words to “fellow members for cooking with care” in

the morning introducing the mindfulness breakfast reflect that situation. For some older members, the difficulties encountered in daily life can be more easily resolved by performing what they refer to as “refinement of the mind through practice.” Xiao Tan, who has been living in Sunshine Ecovillage for more than three years, responded to these challenges by saying that “this resistance of the mind must be resolved through mental training ... because the pressure does not come from the fact that one has to cook for forty people, it comes from fear.”

In fact, everything can be used as a practice. The refinement of the mind through practice means, to them, to internalize the problems encountered by individuals and by the collective, and to turn it into an enigma of one’s state of mind. It is explained as nothing other than resolving conflicts and difficulties in real life by regulating one’s mindset and motivating the individual to devote themselves to altruistic action. This method regards all events as practices of the mind, including cooking, attending classes, and dealing with disputes between mentors and students. “If you walk into the kitchen one day with resistance, it is a sign that you have not practiced enough. You need to be able to seize this mindset and put conflicts aside.” This is how Xiao Tan explains the mental state when dealing with such issues. In the dining room on the ground floor of Sunshine Ecovillage, there is a sign on the wall with the Chinese characters for “refinement of the mind through practice” that continuously reminds guests and members of its significance.

In addition to communal living, everyone in the ecovillage is individually responsible for a project, such as the running of the Eco Academy, group receptions, natural farming, plant dyeing, and tea-making. All of these projects are important to the life of the ecovillage, especially when the members in charge change due to turnover. These projects not only provide a certain income for the operation of the organization, but are also important for the practice of the mind of each participant.

The Sunshine Ecovillage farm is situated at the foot of the Xuling Mountain, a twenty-minute drive down the mountain from the village. The farm has approximately fifteen acres (ninety *mu* 亩) of land where they practice natural farming (自然农法). “Not watering and instead waiting for the rain, not fertilizing the soil but leaving it to itself, not weeding but leaving the crops [to grow] in symbiosis with the weeds, stimulating the potential of the vegetables themselves, and focusing on letting the Way (道) follow its natural inclination,” is the ideal method of natural farming, a member once told us. However, this way of farming is often labor intensive and requires much patience, especially in the terraced land surrounding the village. Academy member Wang showed us an obsolete rice mill and the bellows that Sunshine Ecovillage still uses to separate chaff and we spent that afternoon milling rice and chatting. The use of this kind of semi-manual equipment has been largely phased out by the local farmers, and large-scale cultivation at the foot of the

mountains uses more advanced mechanized equipment. On one of those days when there were more visitors to the ecovillage, Wang was busy milling rice for visitors' dinner. During the check-out session in the evening, he shared his feelings about being exhausted after a whole day's work. But Huang Zheng explained that the feeling of exhaustion comes from the mind rather than from the hard work itself. These feelings of exhaustion should be assuaged by refining the mind during work.

As one of the vehicles for mind cultivation, natural farming has spread outward from the ecovillage, also influencing new villagers who have left Sunshine Ecovillage due to their disapproval of the way it is organized. Xiao Bing is a former member who wanted to establish his own ecovillage at the foot of Xuling Mountain, combining natural farming with traditional Chinese medicine. He explained his approach as "either ensuring that people do not get sick, or that they go through natural healing if they have become sick." One younger local villager, Hu Yue, after seeing that the ecovillage farming method has produced better yields that sell for higher prices, has started to emulate their farming method. He now runs his own agriculture company with organic farming in a nearby village.

Natural farming as a way of refining the mind in Sunshine Ecovillage has its footing in how "traditional Chinese culture" is interpreted, especially in the cultivation philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. With the help of the Confucian philosophy of cultivating oneself in daily life, the Daoist philosophy of non-action (无为), and the Buddhist philosophy of overcoming greed, anger, and stupidity, the idea of refining the mind through practice combines inner cultivation with practical ecology. Huang Zheng places special importance on Buddhist philosophy when promoting natural farming as a way of refining the mind, thus mitigating the current ecological crisis.

The approach in Sunshine Ecovillage of refining the mind through farming and cooking practices that has been honed for eight years not only helps maintain the project operation of the ecovillage but also responds to the difficulties and frictions that occur in the eco-villagers' life. Cooking and farming are necessary to keep the daily life in the ecovillage running with supplies and for putting food on the dinner table. In addition, turning conflicts to a question of mindset helps resolve immediate tensions between members and may give them a key for handling social relations later in life. Natural farming has even had a positive effect on the local market for farm produce in the area. For example, local villagers have reduced the use of herbicides and chemical fertilizers since Sunshine Ecovillage only purchases their herbicide-free walnuts. By employing local villagers and selling agricultural products at high prices, Sunshine Ecovillage has shown neighboring farmers the economic feasibility of ecological farming. Some new villagers in Xuling have even adopted some of the concepts of mental practice from Sunshine Ecovillage, such as mindfulness and awareness, and applied them to their own lives.

The Ecological Human and Ecological Awakening: Attaining “Unity of Heaven and Humans”

The epitome of ecological awakening and mind refinement is when one is able to reach the state of an ecological human. Huang Zheng’s status in Sunshine Ecovillage is both that of a spiritual mentor and of a leader of the organization. In fact, his role as spiritual mentor in the ecovillage cannot be overestimated. Although he often stresses the need to decentralize his position, almost all the members and visitors come here because they are inspired by the ecovillage’s international and domestic online promotion staged by him. He is considered by a member to be “strong in energy” (能量强) and “good in cultivation” (修为好). When members are confused in life or worried about the future, they seek him for guidance.

At Sunshine Ecovillage, Huang Zheng attributes his “strong energy” to his own ecologically awakened state and trusts that through the years of living and practicing in the ecovillage, more and more people will come to attain this state. The practices, learning, and cultivation in the ecovillage are all paths to ecological awakening. Even though the ecovillage draws on Confucian classic texts and religious scripts from Buddhism and Daoism, he believes that ecological awakening is a new form of enlightenment for people in this era of ecological crisis. It is different from the enlightenment brought about by religions that rely on personal attachments to a God or an institutionalized setting. Eco-awakening is based in what he sees as a traditional Chinese cultural understanding of the relationship between Heaven, Earth, and humans (天地人), and is only attainable through the ecological human. Huang Zheng once drew an analogy between the two: “Religious awakening is called enlightenment, and the other is eco-awakening. Through the latter, one can give up everything to help the world mitigate the ecological crisis.” The ecological human is “one who has the ability to save the world and at the same time perfect himself or herself. The two are not in contradiction, they are complete and united (合一).”

However, the ecovillage and Huang Zheng’s ideas about ecological awakening also face skepticism and critique. Members question why everyone has to work so hard without any extra income, and some have difficulties adapting to this kind of community life. At the same time, the local government and elderly villagers are suspicious of the eco-villagers’ motives. As a result, Huang Zheng has advanced himself to the center of public attention in social media and promoted the practices of the ecovillage for a broader online audience to bolster the legitimacy of Sunshine Ecovillage. In the following section we discuss how he and the other members appropriate the concept of “traditional culture,” thus tapping into the current political discourse to cope with their crisis of legitimacy.

Transcendence for Distrust and Legitimacy

As early as June 2003, Xi Jinping, then Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, promoted a project called “A thousand villages as models, ten thousand villages to be renovated” (千村示范, 万村整治), which represented the initiation of the “Green Rural Revival Program” (千万工程). Ten thousand or so administrative villages were selected from across Zhejiang province to undergo comprehensive improvement, and one thousand or so villages were to be turned into well-off model villages. The program’s overall aim was to renovate and develop villages in the countryside and focus on rural pollution control and ecological protection and restoration (Wang, Pang, and Li 2024). Xuling became one of these villages. After Xi Jinping’s presidency in 2012, the experiences from Zhejiang’s Green Rural Revival were promoted to develop the countryside all over the country (Gao and Zhou 2024; Xinhua News Agency 2024).

Against the backdrop of the local government’s poverty alleviation and several investment projects in Xuling, Sunshine Ecovillage was initiated in the context of the Green Rural Revival program. Huang Zheng initially planned to develop the whole village’s collective economy and share future profits. However, that project was never fully endorsed by the local government. Additionally, both local villagers in Xuling and the government gradually began to question this ecovillage project that does not invest on a large scale and does not produce economic benefits for participants and the community. The ecovillage did not meet the local government’s economic expectations as part of the Green Rural Revival program. Some local elderly villagers also considered the promotion of meditation, vegetarianism and Confucian, and Daoist and Buddhist practices in Sunshine Ecovillage to be illicit religious activities. Through interviews we have learned that the local government and villagers are wary of this kind of ecovillage organization. Hence, the ecovillage has faced a growing number of challenges to its legitimacy and Huang Zheng has had to organize workshops with greater care and explore ways to better legitimize his own ecological discourse and the ecovillage’s practices.

Sunshine Ecovillage has had to be especially careful about courses involving spiritual and religious content. Ideas and practices inspired by religious traditions cannot be promoted through open courses, only through individual guidance, and thus the Eco Academy arranges courses and holds workshops under the rubric of “traditional culture.” Sunshine Ecovillage has endeavored to interpret religious and spiritual texts and messages in a secular way in order to avoid coming into conflict with state ideology. In fact, these texts and passages interpreted as part of China’s glorious past often link up with national ideology. On January 18, 2017, in a speech at the UN headquarters in Geneva, Xi Jinping mentioned that “we should follow

the concepts of the unity of Heaven and humans, and the (Daoist) concept of the Way, following what is natural, and thus seek the path of sustainable development” (Xi 2017). In 2017, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued a whitepaper entitled “Suggestions on the Implementation of the Project of the Inheritance and Development of the Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture.” This paper takes the promotion of what is referred to as “outstanding traditional culture” (优秀传统文化) as an important Chinese cultural feat to enhance national soft power and achieve national rejuvenation (Xinhua News Agency 2017). Hence, in recent years, Huang Zheng has shifted from EDE theories and postmodern process philosophy to a more grounded emphasis on “traditional Chinese culture,” which is in line with the Communist Party’s official discourse, and therefore helps to alleviate the ecovillage’s legitimacy crisis.

In Sunshine Ecovillage, Chinese “traditional culture” and “Eastern wisdom” as interpreted from selective and partial readings of ancient Chinese texts, take the shape of a dichotomy in the East-West relationship. The West is characterized by its former glory based on an industrial development that spread pollution, while China, the East, the Orient, represents the future and a promise for “a community with a shared future for mankind.” Following the opening ceremony of the Eco Academy in 2024, Huang Zheng organized a roundtable about “Living Out the Eastern Wisdom” in which the founder, the honorary dean, and the authors of this chapter participated. In a discussion about education East and West, Zhang Xiaode, the honorary dean, claimed:

Education under Western industrial civilization is about rational thinking with the aim of pursuing the truth and to paying attention to usefulness. In that way knowledge is turned into a tool that transforms into the power to conquer and transform the world; Chinese wisdom, on the other hand, is meant to seek inward, to let one’s heart communicate with the universe. To solve current problems, we need not knowledge and tools, but an interaction between humans and nature.

These perspectives on the glory of an ancient Chinese ecological past with promises for a global future bolster Chinese nationalism and nativism in the face of what appears as dwindling hopes for a global solution to the current ecological crisis. Chinese eco-enthusiasts are searching for consolation in native education based in spiritual and philosophical texts formed during China’s axial age. At the same time, this serves to alleviate the legitimacy crisis of the ecovillage in their practices and orientation.

Conclusion

Faced with the current global environmental crisis, Prasenjit Duara proposes to revisit alternative Asian traditions to seek more viable cosmological foundations for sustainability (Duara 2015, 2; and in the introduction to this volume). China's religious texts and traditional philosophies are not lacking in ideas and concepts that may be employed in contemporary work for sustainability, as we have shown in this chapter. In Sunshine Ecovillage, the ultimate authority for ecological protection resides in the self-realization of an ecological human. Our aim has been to understand how ancient texts about China's cosmological foundations are (re)interpreted, romanticized, and put into practice in the context of an ecovillage like Sunshine. We have furthermore addressed questions of the social impact and political implications of these practices in Sunshine Ecovillage and have endeavored to identify key aspects of the rural ecovillage movement in China through this case study.

Throughout years of practice in Sunshine Ecovillage, Huang Zheng has endeavored to embed elements of what he terms "Chinese traditional culture" into GEN's ecovillage designs. In this vision, the practices they have established in Sunshine Ecovillage are precisely the way they imagine people must have lived in harmony with nature in ancient times. He endeavors to discover and put into practice the ideas of sustainable development that he finds in many strands and texts of Chinese traditional cosmologies, especially in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. The idea of an idealized ecological human is at the core of the ecovillage's endeavors to cultivate individuals to guide in rescuing the world from environmental destruction, not unlike a Confucian sage or a Buddhist Bodhisattva.

Through this deployment of otherworldly powers and authority, Huang Zheng and his fellow eco-villagers can find refuge from the apprehensions of urban life and at the same time introduce newcomers to what is claimed to be sustainable ways of living in harmony with the forces and elements of nature. In the process of "living out traditional culture," the Sunshine Ecovillage practices do not simply mark a bodily return to the traditional Chinese countryside, but a creation or even invention of a tradition-inspired life secluded from urban agonies. Different from other city-dwellers who have sought a better life in rural China, the Sunshine ecovillagers emphasize the added value of "refinement of the mind through practice." Indeed, even if those who left the ecovillage mostly returned to their previous social lives, the majority acknowledged the positive impact of the experience of "spiritual healing" on their subsequent lives, and some have even gone on to start ecovillage experiments of their own elsewhere.

Although the specific interpretation and understanding of what is implied in traditional culture among the members may deviate from that of Huang Zheng, and even if some members leave the village due to disagreements over ideals, the goal

of sustainable development is unanimously shared among the ecovillagers, with Huang Zheng serving as their spiritual guide as well as the leader of the activities and of the running of the daily business of Sunshine Ecovillage. Besides leading members in ecological practices through self-cultivation, Huang Zheng attaches great importance to the promotion of the beautiful natural landscape in Xuling and the ecological ideas of Sunshine Ecovillage. He invites every foreign guest to record an introductory video of the ecovillage in their local language, hoping to attract people from all over the world to visit. He often utilizes live streaming and video recording to showcase the daily activities, such as the tea-making process, the Eco Academy opening ceremonies, ecological village conferences, as well as workshops and lectures, so that more ecological enthusiasts can witness them and be attracted to the village. Hence, even if Sunshine Ecovillage represents the practice of a relatively small group of people, it has become an important arena for exploring and developing ecological and sustainable forms of rural living in contemporary China.

Notes

- ¹ Citations without references were gathered during fieldwork and are unpublished sources.
- ² In the following we use the word 'members' to designate both students who currently studying in the academy and former students who have finished education in the academy while still living and practicing in the ecovillage.

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