

LIVELY RELIGIOUS ECOLOGY IN HIGHLAND ASIA

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Photo by Dan Smyer Yü

Writing as one of the initial seed-sowers of religion and ecology in Asia, my story of the spread and indigenization of this interdisciplinary field began with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim two decades ago in the manner of brainstorming, interdisciplinary conferences, summer schools, and publishing workshops for graduate students and early-career scholars. The journey began in the heart of China but the flourishing of the version I have been promoting is mostly taking place in the greater Himalayan borderlands of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Southwest China, and the Tibetan Plateau. I often call this multi-ethnolinguistic and multistate borderland the “trans-Himalayan region” (Smyer Yü and Michaud 2017). Here, this Asian incarnation of religion and ecology is grounded in the region’s diverse ecological contexts and spiritual traditions. It retains much of the original ethos of Tucker and Grim shown in the series of conferences on religions of the world and ecology at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions launched in 1996, marking the inaugural year of this growing field. At the same time, its indigenization in the Asian highlands has its own evolution—of different phases, colors, shapes, and future aspirations. Let me tell the story.

Originating in North America, the spread of religion and ecology to China was marked by the Chinese translations of *Confucianism and Ecology: The*

Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans (Tucker and Berthrong 1998) and *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within A Cosmic Landscape* (Girardot et al. 2001). Peng Guoxiang of Peking University and Chen Xia of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences respectively translated them in 2008. The wider indigenization of religion and ecology in Asia took place in 2010 when Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and I began to co-organize a conference, thematized as “Religious Diversity and Ecological Sustainability in China.” The effort was supported by the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Minzu University of China, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. It was hosted at Minzu University of China, Beijing, in 2012. Given our respective specializations in Confucianism, Indigenous spiritual ecologies, and Asian Buddhist and Indigenous traditions, “China,” as it was framed in the conference, was recognized as an inter-Asian China, signifying that the imperial history of the nation subsequently shaped its current ethnocultural diversity and multinational borderlands. The cultural and scholarly backgrounds of the invited participants from over forty-five ethnic and national backgrounds reflected this inter-Asian diversity. The outcomes of the conference were published in both English and Chinese languages (Miller, Smyer Yü, and van der Veer 2014; Su and Smyer Yü 2013). They bore what I called a “Tucker and Grim characteristic” (Smyer Yü 2014) demonstrated by their urgent call for building alliances between religion and ecology in the broadest sense, and for diverse spiritual understandings of the ecological Earth. The two multi-authored publications became textbooks and research references in China and neighboring countries such as Japan and South Korea.

The ending of this publishing project was the beginning of a new phase, as I continued to co-expand the field of religion and ecology with Asia-based peer scholars. Given my expertise in modern Himalayan-Tibetan studies, it was inevitable that this new phase of religion and ecology would be mostly situated in the Tibetan Plateau, the eastern Himalayan borderlands, and the hilly-riverine areas of Yunnan and Myanmar. At these higher elevations, the mountains, plateaus, and water bodies annually hum with the monsoon. This contributes to local weather events and to global climatic patternings. Here we find various forms of Indigenous animisms alive on their own or under the banner of world religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. This new phase began to unveil a trans-Himalayan face of religion and ecology. It is characteristically Indigenous-centered but globally engaged and explores feasible ways and means to translate diverse local ecospiritual knowledge from Asia’s Global South into interdisciplinary and policy languages accessible and intelligible for a greater audience.



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The alliance of modern science and traditional environmental knowledge became a priority on my collaborative agenda with regional peer scholars, scientists, conservation specialists, and policymakers. These include Ambika Aiyadurai of Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar, Ming He of Yunnan University, Iftekhar Iqbal of Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Yunxia Li of Yunnan Minzu University, Joy L.K. Pachuau of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Arupjyoti Sakia of Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Faxiang Su of Minzu University of China, Chi Huyen Truong of the Himalayan University Consortium, and Jelle Wouters of Royal Thimphu College. In many ways, we were answering Robin Wall Kimmerer's call, largely situated in the field of the environmental humanities, for the interweaving of Indigenous knowledges with those of modern science (Kimmerer 2013). We were becoming keenly aware of the interdisciplinary benefits of building an alliance of religion and ecology with the environmental humanities as an effective way of conveying invaluable Indigenous knowledge for global endeavors to forge new environmental ethics in the Anthropocene and build sustainable futures.

In 2015 and 2016, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology generously offered help to co-organize annual summer schools for graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career scholars from Asia and around the world. They

were hosted by the Center for Trans-Himalayan Studies at Yunnan Minzu University. The courses, discussion sessions, and assignments were interdisciplinarily- and publicly-engaged as well as action-packed. The collective action of the participants was to make two translated volumes as textbooks of religion and ecology and of multidisciplinary environmental studies with a trans-Himalayan theme (Smyer Yü et al. 2017a; Smyer Yü et al. 2017b).

The publications revealed to us the developmental problems of coordinating religion and ecology and the environmental humanities. The former emphasizes individual religions' ecological experiences and knowledge mostly framed in religious studies that set boundaries between individual religious traditions and that do not yet prioritize the urgency of making religious ecological knowledge more accessible across the sciences and humanities. The latter is commonly identified with its low enthusiasm for religious ecologies. With this keen awareness, for the following years, we were compelled to find common ground between religious ecology and the environmental humanities. The Himalayan University Consortium (<https://huc-hkh.org/>) came to our aid by supporting resilience-building workshops for local students and scholars in the Himalayan region. The outcomes of these gatherings were published as edited volumes and have been built into the curricula of participating scholars. During the pandemic years, we continued our collaborative research and publishing endeavors for solidifying the needed alliance between the two growing fields. Our collective efforts have comfortably allowed us to be simultaneously religious ecologists and environmental humanists or to be ecospiritual humanists who synergize the two fields into one. It pays off when we embrace both interdisciplines as a synergetic union.

From 2021 to 2024, we published more research-based, collaborative books and journal articles. In particular, published in the Routledge Environmental Humanities Series, *Environmental Humanities in the New Himalayas: Symbiotic Indigeneity, Commoning, Sustainability* (Smyer Yü and de Maaker 2021); *Storying Multipolar Climes of the Himalaya, Andes and Arctic: Anthropocenic Climate and Shapeshifting Watery Lifeworlds* (Smyer Yü and Wouters 2023); and *Himalayan Climes and Multispecies Encounters* (Wouters and Smyer Yü 2024). These works are representative of our intent to blur the boundaries of the two fields. We thus shapeshift our interdisciplinary identities between the religious ecologist and the environmental humanist. We fundamentally see everything and everyone on Earth as an inherent part of what many scientists call the "living matter" of the geological forces that afford us to be "walking, talking minerals" (Vernadski 1998; Margulis and Sagan 1995), embodied with spiritual aspirations and material realities. What is animate is material and vice versa; what is sacred is ecological and vice versa; and what is transcendent is this-worldly and vice versa. The Earth makes the ecological

symbiosis of lifeworlds possible. Thus, we find spiritual transcendence in the horizontal connectivity of life rather than in a vertical relation to an other-worldly, non-ecological entity.

In sum, the contributions of trans-Himalayan religion and ecology are primarily found in the interdisciplinary conceptualizations of what we call the “Earth’s innate freedom,” “the Earth’s environmental commoning,” “the affective consciousness of the Earth,” “symbiotic indigeneity,” “nonhuman indigeneity,” and “indigenous climes” elaborated in the individual chapters of the abovementioned books. The efficacy of these emerging conceptual vehicles in our texts is found in their interdisciplinary- and policy-translatability and the public-accessibility of faith-based ecological knowledge. Our lived experiences as natives and our research activities as scientists in the vast landscapes of the greater Himalayan-Tibetan highlands allow us to feel, sense, and reflect on the greatness of the Earth in both spiritually sublime and geologically inspiring ways. We are thus attentively storying the awe-inspiring power of the Earth’s own environmental freedom and geo-ecological commoning that makes continents, shapes mountains, creates water bodies, and sustains the livingness of matter in every life. Recognizing the spiritual and physical facts of being ensouled by the Earth, embodied with the lively minerals of the Earth, and pulsing with the Earth’s geophysiological movements, we feel called to continue the journey of religion and ecology with a variety of humanistic approaches.

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