



The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China

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This is the first environmental history of China during the three thousand years for which there are written records. It is also a treasure trove of literary, political, aesthetic, scientific, and religious sources, which allow the reader direct access to the views and feelings of the Chinese people toward their environment and their landscape.

Elvin chronicles the spread of the Chinese style of farming that eliminated the habitat of the elephants that populated the country alongside much of its original wildlife; the destruction of most of the forests; the impact of war on the environmental transformation of the landscape; and the re-engineering of the countryside through water-control systems, some of gigantic size. He documents the histories of three contrasting localities within China to show how ecological dynamics defined the lives of the inhabitants. And he shows that China in the eighteenth century, on the eve of the modern era, was probably more environmentally degraded than northwestern Europe around this time.

Indispensable for its new perspective on long-term Chinese history and its explanation of the roots of China's present-day environmental crisis, this book opens a door into the Chinese past.

The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China Details

Date : Published September 21st 2006 by Yale University Press (first published March 1st 2001)

ISBN : 9780300119930

Author : Mark Elvin

Format : Paperback 592 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, China, Nonfiction, Environment, World History, Nature



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T.R. says

To build a portrait of environmental history on a canvas spanning 4000 years, in a large country with an extraordinary geographic and demographic profile like China, is no easy task. Somehow, Mark Elvin, in this book, manages to pull it off, with engaging stories and compelling analysis of the historical record. There have been many reviews of this book already, by historians, and they have made a better assessment than I can, in all honesty, make here. But let me share straight off, as an ecologist who is no historian, some of the things I liked about this book and some of what I learnt.

The first aspect that I liked, which finds little mention in other reviews, is the author's extensive use of Chinese literature, especially period poetry, presented in translation (often at length) to build his narrative and arguments. Some of the poetry is telling in detail. Poets who recount the plight of farmers in an era of agricultural and demographic expansion, the harsh conditions of coal-miners, the scarcity of fuelwood and food. They write of floods and famine, of forests and rain, of nature as resource and as a force. Not only do these evoke descriptions of the period, they also bring insights into people's perceptions of the environment. This is particularly used by the author in the latter parts of the book.

A second aspect, which was interesting is the comparison, of the history of landscapes and peoples in three different regions in China. The author makes a convincing case for the strong influences that landscapes cast on history, and conversely, on how the historical changes in people, land-use, and resource exploitation cast their sometimes indelible mark on the landscapes.

Finally, it is good to see the comprehensive sweep of the analysis of Chinese environmental history, especially in the opening chapters. The retreat of the elephants, mentioned in the title, is used as a defining marker of the decline in forests and wildlife with the expansion of farming and pre-industrial development in China. Deforestation is linked to erosion and rising river basins, and consequently to catastrophic floods. In addition, the response in terms of hydraulic measures, of dykes and dams and canals, is clearly pinned down for the additional implications that these engineering measures have: costly and constant repair and maintenance. The importance of environmental buffers runs as a thread through the historical narrative.

The flip side of the book is its length, the varying structure of narrative, and the lack of illustrative maps (additionally problematic while reading on the Kindle edition). It would have also helped if the author had presented a summary of key conclusions and concepts at the end of each section of the book. The concluding remarks does a good job of setting out an analytical context and mentioning some broad conclusions, while highlighting the further work, comparisons, and empirical research that is required in future.

Dan Gorman says

Enormous, disjointed, and a dense read, The Retreat of the Elephants is nonetheless an extraordinary work of scholarship, even if its final form is not easily digested. Mark Elvin looks at four thousand years of Chinese history to show the gap between the Chinese people's love of nature and the simultaneous destruction of the environment for the sake of commerce and political power. By the 1800s, China had undertaken more

environmentally intensive projects than the West. China's environmental degradation was also becoming severe; by the present day, that degradation has become catastrophic and unsustainable. The book wanders over much ground, covering religion, poetry, hydraulics and watershed management, imperial politics, superstition, legends, comparative studies of different provinces, warfare, the use of nature in war, longevity, and food. In many ways, this book reads like the summary of a pathbreaking conference – it lays out the parameters of a field and gives other historians topics to write about. However, I do disagree with Elvin's contention that environmental history only applies to the period for which we have written sources about the environment. I and quite a few biologists & geologists would contend that we can use natural evidence to tell us about the Earth's history and mankind's relationship with nature before writing was invented.

Bryn Hammond says

Indispensable, and the only one of its kind.

The murder of the last elephants gets me terribly upset. I'd shoot the culprits. That's how civilized I am.

The theme is Civilization - in this case China, but so us - against the wild, and the Chinese were no better with a wild animal than the persecutors of the wolf in North America, for example.

And find out the truth about cities. Run like great jails, these were. Examine what 'civilized' means to you.

Tom Fox says

Very erudite book that incorporates many disciplines, linguistics anthropology environmental history

One of the most provocative and influential books I have read. Dr. Elvin translates "Oracle bones" The Chinese long view of history

Daniel says

I finished reading this just as Darren Aronofsky's "Noah" opened in theaters. Quite appropriate, given the book's focus on hydrological disasters!

If you don't mind a spoiler (can there be spoilers for history books?) Mark Elvin arrives at a somewhat pessimistic conclusion, casting doubt on the "hope that we can escape from our present environmental difficulties by means of a transformation of consciousness".

Using the vast expanse of Chinese history as a source of examples, he finds that the pursuit of profit and military advantage tends to trump any enlightened view about the environment a culture might have. A heightened appreciation of Nature may come about as a reaction to its very destruction, but not prevent such destruction in the long run.

The book contains a surprising insight about technological and economic development: even if they allow greater control over nature and huge increases in population, they may in fact *worsen* the average quality of life in some cases. I was reminded of Derek Parfit's thorny dilemma of population ethics, the "repugnant conclusion". How can we adjudicate ethically between a small population and a much larger population with

worse quality of life?

Jared Diamond argues in his essay "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race" that agriculturalists lived shorter lives and were less healthy than hunter-gatherers. Elvin seems to agree. He recounts that ancient rulers often had to *force* their subjects to take on agriculture. And see this quote from the book. Are Diamond and Elvin perhaps over-romanticizing pre-agricultural times?

There's a lot more to this book, for example how Elvin corrects Max Weber's misconceptions about Chinese culture. It can get a bit heavy-going at times, but I recommend it.

Mumallah says

A top-notch environmental history of early and medieval China. Many dislike the author's creative writing style, but I actually really enjoy it -- the claims are up-front and the evidence is presented quite directly. A pinnacle of Environmental History, once people get past the innovative writing style (which I personally think should be done more often anyways).

Mary Soderstrom says

Elephants in China? Yes, and Forests Too

Every once in a while you come across a book so original and thought-provoking that you make you gasp in admiration. *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* by Mark Elvin is such a book.

It turned up when I was doing a search about the difficult relation between humans and forests over history as part of the research for my next non-fiction project, *Road through Time*. A little time trolling library catalogues and data bases and I came up with a fascinating reading list that I'm currently working my through. (Another good one is *Deforesting the Earth, From Prehistory to Global Crisis: An Abridgement* by Michael Williams, whose title has got to be an inside joke since it has 561 pages.)

Elvin is from New Zealand, and perhaps that South Pacific vantage point has allowed him to write a history of the rise of intensive agriculture in China and the accompanying destruction of forests, water courses and grasslands. He takes as his starting image the herds of elephants which five thousand years ago roamed woods around Beijing--apparently there are many caches of the beasts' bones in that part of China. The huge herbivores were hunted by the elite, but that was not what did them in. Rather, they were the type of pachyderms which could not survive outside forests, and as the Chinese vigorously deforested the land, they retreated until now there are only a few left on the border with Myanmar.

What happened next, Elvin recounts with the same striking storyteller's skills. What is more he quotes extensively from Chinese poetry to bring the rest of his history to life. While it appears that he greatly regrets what the Chinese have done to their land over the last five thousand years, he also shows much sympathy for the reasons that lie behind their desire to make every inch productive.

I'm no Asian scholar so I can not critique either his sources or his analysis, but the 50 pages or so of notes and bibliography at the end of the book attest to Elvin's seriousness and his academic credentials.

If you are interested in China, the environment or Chinese literature, this book is a must-read.

Max says

A great, if dry in points, environmental approach to the broad sweep of Chinese history, countering the common assumption that traditional Chinese philosophy (Daoism etc) leads to a way of life somehow more "in harmony with nature" than the dominant philosophies and religions of the West.

FiveBooks says

Isabel Hilton, editor of the website China Dialogue has chosen to discuss *The Retreat of the Elephants* by Mark Elvin on FiveBooks as one of the top five on her subject -China's Environmental Crisis, saying that:

"...The most comprehensive and scholarly history of the Han people's relationship to their environment...The environmental history of China is a very interesting one, and there is this mythology that Chinese peasants are somehow in tune with nature. But if you read Elvin you realise that in China there has actually been 2,000 years of unsustainable development and environmental degradation..."

The full interview is available here: <http://fivebooks.com/interviews/isabe...>

Hildegart says

This is a long book dedicated to the environmental history of China. He includes a lot of work from contemporary writers to the point it is just way too much!

Fortis says

As a Chinese I am amazed by the quality and quantity of quoted poems&chorographies. It is interesting to read the poems and think which one they were in Chinese. Actually many poems are new to me, I often find my self surprised to find "Ah I did not expect that poet ever wrote something like that!" and "Never heard those poems in that dynasty before!".

As the environmental part, I do not have the position to judge since it is not my major. But the detailed descriptions, convincing facts are unquestionably authoritative and intriguing.

Threaded says

interesting stuff...

David says

Elephants and rhinoceroses once roamed the plains of what is now Beijing. The Yellow River was not always yellow. And the modern Chinese landscape was not always the barren, treeless expanse that much of it is today. Accounting for how these things came to be is the aim of Elvin's pioneering synthesis. It is a story that builds in the costs of progress, not from a late moment in the history of industrialization, but from the very beginning of one of our oldest civilizations, and by implication, all civilization.

Similar stories of human society expanding at the expense of megafauna (such as elephants, rhinos and tigers) and environmental degradation could be told for virtually any area or period of organized human activity. What makes Elvin's study interesting is its treatment of so great a span of history within one region, and the relative richness of resources available to us for its investigation. What makes his perspective urgent is the widespread contemporary sense that we are entering upon an era of heightened environmental unpredictability, in which the dynamic interaction between human and natural systems is shifting radically.

As it was 4,000 years ago, China is at the center of this story today, though readers should not take up this book expecting a review of China's current environmental challenges. Elvin's aim is broader than any possible catalog or indictment of contemporary ecological woes. In fact, the Chinese exposure to environmental catastrophe was much greater only several hundred years ago, when floods of epic proportions and famines affecting millions of people followed closely one upon the other. What Elvin narrates is the struggle to bring stability to naturally fluctuating environments - especially its great rivers, wetlands, and estuaries - and the trade-offs that inescapably accompanied them. Our present predicament, as pressing as it is, is the latest episode in a very long drama.

There is no better example of this than the efforts at hydrological engineering that in some sense made Chinese civilization possible to begin with, and have been seen by some as leaving an indelible imprint on it in the form of 'hydrological despotism.' So great has been the need to control water for the sake of agriculture, the argument goes, and so extensive has been the mobilization of resources required to do so, that an authoritarian and highly bureaucratized Chinese state has been almost a geographical necessity from the beginning.

Elvin doesn't go this far, but in telling his tale, through an impressive, moving, and often delightful assemblage of historical sources, he makes clear the Faustian bargains that were made to establish the earliest lineaments of the state and society in China. The implications carry far beyond the twin valleys of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. Urban, agricultural settlement in China was a response to the practical needs of continual warfare. The needs of warfare drove an agricultural expansion that targeted the temperate forests of East Asia and the species it supported. The archaic states of China were conscious of their antagonism to elements of the natural world; Elvin cites several pangyrics to the Shang and Zhou Dynasties that equate the destruction of forests with the consolidation of power, the establishment of cities, and the spread of civilization. Elvin highlights this sentiment as it reappears in various texts in later centuries.

The wealth generated by this new form of human settlement enabled more sophisticated states to arise, which in turn acquired the capacity to implement enormous irrigation works to better serve their agricultural needs. Human population swells, and the buffers of ecological protection - mainly forests inland, and marshland along the coasts - from extreme events become dangerously thin as a result. The idea of extreme events caused by anthropomorphic activity thus long precedes carbon-induced climate change. The leading example

of this feedback loop, which is the leitmotif of the book, is deforestation. It was clearance of forests along the middle reaches of the Yellow River in the ancient Qin Dynasty that led to the erosion of loess soils from cultivated fields which gave the 'River' its 'Yellow' character. Agriculture sent soil down the rivers, soil which settled as farmland elsewhere, at the price of more frequent flooding. From this point on, as Elvin documents, the increasing rate of floods and dike failures along the Yellow River corresponded to deforestation all along the river's course, and ever greater efforts to control its power.

Elvin argues that the efforts to control the Yellow River, especially under the 'river tamer' Pan Jixun in the 1570s, and the centuries-long battle against the East China sea in the Bay of Hangzhou, represent respectively the greatest single human impact and program for action upon the environment in premodern times anywhere in the world. Debunked, in consequence, is the notion that only the West sought to comprehensively control nature.

The book suffers from a few flaws, chief among them the absence of maps, which is galling in a book that pays such close attention to geography. It is long, and in places burdened with taxonomic cataloging of flora and fauna. Some readers may feel that Elvin dumps long excerpts of historical text whole cloth into the narrative, when a shorter gloss would do just as well.

For my part, I appreciated Elvin's method of textual citation. It accounts for one of the book's greatest successes: providing the reader an opportunity to envision, and almost in some places to hear and smell, now vanished worlds of the senses. We see how Elvin extracts the picture of a landscape, its economy and technological landmarks and color and flora and fauna, from a grab bag of classical poems. The same is as true, if not more so, of the human experience of all of these: what it is like to be stalked by a tiger, or a python; how one might possibly have sold off one's wife or children in time of famine, or gnawed on the bark of an elm tree out of hunger; a world populated by dragons and goblins and non-Han peoples who viewed their wooded environments more charitably than their Han neighbors.

Elvin does not romanticize the efforts of millions over the centuries to survive in the face of countless threats. But he does, at each point at which the evidence allows, account for the trade-offs and costs for each gain in security, and for the epic loss resulting from the trade of ecological richness for human riches.
