

Forest Chapter: From Cultural Roots to a Green China



Yun Xiang (Chinese, 1586–1655), Landscapes after old masters, Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911) dynasty The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Open Access). Giant Panda National Park (Source: People’s Pictorial; 01/31/2024).

Preface

Forests are the cradle of human civilization, inseparable from the development of human history. Forests absorb carbon dioxide, release oxygen, and maintain the balance of the atmosphere, providing the most fundamental conditions for human survival while mitigating climate change. Forests also supply food, fuel, medicine, timber, and shelter. Humanity has always felt a natural closeness and reverence for forests, which serve as sources of thought and art, embodying both practical survival wisdom and spiritual symbols. From the mythical forests of Europe, to the sacred groves of Africa, to the holy mountain forests of Native American cultures, people across civilizations have revered the power of forests.

As a vital branch of human civilization, Chinese civilization reflects both this universal human dependence on forests and its own unique forest culture. In traditional Chinese thought, forests have long been vessels of spiritual meaning, philosophical reflection, and daily practice. Classical poetry, painting, and literature express deep affection for forests and aspirations for a higher spiritual life. Confucianism advocates “*The benevolent delight in mountains, the wise delight in*

water”; scholars viewed retreat into forests and mountains as a path to self-cultivation. Daoism promotes the principle of “*Dao follows Nature*,” with forest seclusion as a form of harmonious coexistence with nature. Buddhist temples were often built in secluded forests, symbolizing purity and enlightenment.

However, modern China suffered severe forest degradation and ecological consequences. From the late Qing Dynasty (1840–1911) through the Second World War, warfare, foreign invasions and colonial exploitation, agricultural expansion, and industrial development drastically reduced forest resources. After 1949, rapid development for national construction caused another round of deforestation in the mid-to-late 20th century. The consequences were grave. For example, the destruction of upstream forests of the Yellow River led to severe soil erosion and sedimentation, raising the riverbed into a “suspended river” that endangered downstream populations. Frequent floods, sandstorms, and ecological crises awakened public awareness of the ecological value of forests. People turned back to the traditional wisdom of “*coexistence of all beings*” (*wan wu gong sheng* 万物共生) and began striving to rebuild a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

With growing aspirations for a better life in harmony with nature, China incorporated *Ecological Civilization* into the Constitution and mobilized nationwide efforts to restore a healthy environment. By the end of 2025, China's forest coverage rate reached about over 25%, while forest stock volume approached 21 billion cubic meters. China continues to lead the world in afforestation and ecological restoration and has become a major contributor to global greening.

Forests have since seen a vigorous revival, not only vital ecological shields but also symbols of cultural continuity. Forest conservation and restoration aim to recover ecosystem services such as air purification, water conservation, and carbon sequestration, while drawing upon traditional cultural wisdom to achieve positive interaction among humans, nature, and the economy. Whether through the restoration of natural vegetation in such as the *Three-North Shelterbelt Program* (“Green Great Wall”), the exploration of human–land harmony in national parks, or urban forestry efforts in Beijing, contemporary China demonstrates the inheritance and renewal of cultural values through ecological practice.

The historical transformations of forests reflect the broader trajectory of human–nature relations. Today’s Ecological Civilization construction continues the traditional Chinese philosophy of “*unity of Heaven and humanity*” (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一) while responding to modern global calls for sustainability. By integrating traditional wisdom with forest restoration practices, China offers a pathway for translating ecological ideals into reality.

From cultural roots to a green China, forests are once again flourishing with vitality and strength.