

II. Modern Forest Degradation and Reflection

Forests have long been a vital foundation of Chinese civilization. Yet modern history brought extensive forest degradation driven by war, foreign resource extraction, agricultural expansion, and industrial development. By the early years of the People's Republic of China, the first national forest inventory reported a forest coverage rate of only about 8.6%.



Japan's Colonial Plunder of Forest Resources in Northeast China (Source: 10/26/2022 Sohu)

Although large-scale reforestation programs increased forest cover to 16.55% by the late twentieth century, the loss of old-growth forests and the decline of ecological functions remained serious challenges. Continuous over-logging and land reclamation contributed to desertification, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and frequent environmental disasters that threatened both ecological security and human well-being.

As forests declined, many cultural traditions associated with landscapes and harmonious human–nature relationships also weakened. Wildlife deeply embedded in Chinese culture experienced dramatic population declines. Tigers, symbols of strength and authority, sika deer, associated with good fortune and harmony, and red-crowned cranes, traditional symbols of longevity, all became increasingly rare. The degradation of forests represented not only an ecological crisis but also a loss of cultural heritage.

These experiences prompted widespread reflection on the relationship between people and nature. They helped foster a renewed appreciation of traditional ecological values and contributed to growing public support for forest conservation, ecological restoration, and the broader vision of Ecological Civilization.



Floods in 1998 (Source: CCTV news; 08/16/2021).



View of the Forbidden City in a sandstorm in Beijing, China, on May.4, 2017. A sandstorm swept over large swathes of north China including Beijing, turning the sky yellow and obscuring visibility. Photo: IC (Source: Caixin Global; 05/05/2017).