

‘Daoist Phytopedagogy’: Toward a Vegetal Theory of Literary Learning through Mamang Dai's River Poems

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Abstract

This article proposes ‘Daoist Phytopedagogy’ as a new theoretical framework for literary studies by bringing Daoist philosophy into dialogue with Indigenous ecological consciousness as articulated in River Poems by Mamang Dai. Rather than treating plants as symbolic extensions of human emotion, Daoist Phytopedagogy argues that vegetal life constitutes a mode of ecological instruction through which literature cultivates relational, ethical, and epistemological modes of learning. Drawing upon the philosophical concepts of the Dao, wu wei (effortless action), ziran (natural spontaneity), and the dynamic interdependence of the ten thousand beings as articulated in the Dao De Jing and the Zhuangzi, the paper demonstrates that Mamang Dai’s poetic landscapes are not passive settings but pedagogical communities in which rivers, forests, mountains, trees, grasses, and seasonal rhythms function as active participants in the formation of ecological consciousness. While Daoism and the Indigenous cosmologies of Arunachal Pradesh emerge from distinct historical and cultural traditions, the article argues that they converge in their rejection of anthropocentrism, their affirmation of relational existence, and their understanding of nature as a living process rather than an inert object. Through close textual readings of selected poems from River Poems (2004), the study examines how vegetal presence reshapes literary learning by encouraging attentiveness, reciprocity, humility, and ecological coexistence instead of mastery and domination. The article further contends that literary pedagogy can move beyond human-centred interpretive paradigms by recognising plants as epistemic companions whose silent vitality reconfigures ethical relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. In doing so, Daoist Phytopedagogy contributes an original conceptual model to environmental humanities, plant humanities, comparative philosophy, and ecocriticism while extending current debates on vegetal agency into the domain of literary education. By establishing a comparative conversation between Daoist philosophy and Indigenous ecological poetics, the paper demonstrates that literature itself can become a site of ecological learning where vegetal life teaches modes of coexistence, relational ethics, and planetary responsibility without reducing either tradition to the other.

Keywords: ‘Daoist Phytopedagogy’; Daoist Philosophy; Mamang Dai; Plant Pedagogy; Environmental Humanities.

1. Introduction

The accelerating ecological crises of the twenty-first century have fundamentally reshaped literary and philosophical inquiry, prompting scholars to reconsider long-standing assumptions regarding the relationship between humans and the natural world. Within the environmental humanities, ecocriticism, posthumanism, and plant studies, increasing attention has been devoted to the agency of non-human life and to the ethical implications of recognising nature as an active participant in cultural production rather than a passive backdrop for human experience. This intellectual transition has simultaneously encouraged literary scholars to investigate how texts cultivate ecological consciousness through forms of relational thinking that move beyond anthropocentric paradigms.

Among the philosophical traditions that offer profound resources for such ecological inquiry, Daoism occupies a distinctive position. The Dao De Jing presents the Dao as the inexhaustible source through which all beings arise and to which they remain intrinsically related (Dao De

Jing, ch. 1). Rather than advocating domination over nature, the text repeatedly emphasises harmony, humility, simplicity, and responsiveness to the spontaneous rhythms of the natural world (Dao De Jing, chs. 8, 25, 37). Likewise, the Zhuangzi challenges rigid distinctions between humanity and the myriad forms of existence, proposing instead a vision of reality grounded in transformation, interdependence, and the equal participation of all beings within the continuous unfolding of the Dao (Zhuangzi, chs. 2, 17). These foundational principles have led many contemporary scholars to recognise Daoism as one of the world's most significant ecological philosophies (Miller; Ames and Hall).

The growing body of scholarship on Daoist environmental thought has demonstrated that Daoism provides an alternative to anthropocentric models of knowledge by understanding humans as participants within, rather than masters of, the natural order. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall argue that classical Daoism advances a fundamentally relational ontology in which existence is constituted through dynamic interdependence rather than isolated substance (Ames and Hall). Similarly, James Miller observes that Daoist ecological ethics emerge from an understanding of nature as a living process whose intrinsic value cannot be reduced to human utility (Miller). Such studies have significantly expanded the relevance of Daoist philosophy within contemporary environmental humanities. Nevertheless, comparatively little scholarship has explored how Daoist concepts might contribute to a theory of literary learning through vegetal life or how they might illuminate Indigenous ecological poetics beyond the Chinese cultural sphere.

It is within this scholarly context that the poetry of Mamang Dai assumes particular significance. As one of the foremost literary voices from Arunachal Pradesh, Dai consistently represents rivers, forests, mountains, trees, birds, and ancestral landscapes not merely as descriptive features of place but as living presences that sustain memory, community, and ethical responsibility. Her poems emerge from the oral traditions and ecological worldview of the Adi people, where the boundaries separating human existence from the surrounding landscape remain fluid and reciprocal. Consequently, nature in River Poems is neither ornamental nor metaphorically subordinate to human experience; instead, it functions as an active participant in cultural knowledge and collective identity.

Although Daoist philosophy and the Indigenous cosmologies of Arunachal Pradesh arise from distinct historical, geographical, and cultural traditions, both traditions reject the assumption that humans occupy a privileged position outside the natural world. Rather than proposing a historical connection or direct philosophical influence between them, this article adopts a comparative hermeneutic approach that places these traditions into dialogue while respecting their intellectual autonomy. The comparison therefore seeks to identify convergent ecological insights rather than establish genealogical relationships.

To facilitate this dialogue, this article introduces Daoist Phytopedagogy as a new theoretical framework. Daoist Phytopedagogy is proposed here as a mode of literary learning in which vegetal life functions as an epistemic presence capable of cultivating ecological consciousness through relational coexistence rather than didactic instruction. The framework draws upon the Daoist concepts of Dao, wu wei, and ziran while simultaneously engaging the Indigenous ecological imagination embodied in Mamang Dai's poetry. In this formulation, plants are not passive metaphors but participants in processes of perception, ethical formation, and environmental understanding. Literary learning consequently emerges through attentive encounters with vegetal existence, where growth, rootedness, regeneration, and seasonal transformation become modes of ecological knowledge.

The present study therefore argues that River Poems reconfigures literary pedagogy by presenting plants, rivers, forests, and mountains as living teachers whose presence unsettles anthropocentric habits of reading. Through close textual analysis of Dai's poems, interpreted alongside key concepts from classical Daoism, the article demonstrates that ecological learning is generated not through mastery of nature but through participation in its relational processes. By proposing Daoist Phytopedagogy as a new conceptual framework, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in environmental humanities, plant humanities, comparative philosophy, and literary studies while opening a new avenue for understanding the pedagogical significance of vegetal life in contemporary poetry.

1.1 Daoism, Vegetal Thought, and the Philosophical Foundations of Daoist Phytopedagogy

The philosophical foundations of Daoist Phytopedagogy emerge from the classical Daoist understanding that existence is constituted through dynamic relationships rather than fixed substances. Unlike philosophical systems that privilege the human as the centre of knowledge, classical Daoism situates humanity within an ever-changing cosmos in which all beings participate in the unfolding of the Dao. The opening chapter of the *Dao De Jing* immediately cautions against reducing the Dao to a fixed conceptual object, asserting that "the Dao that can be spoken is not the constant Dao" (*Dao De Jing*, ch. 1). This statement is not merely a linguistic paradox; it establishes a philosophical orientation in which reality exceeds human categories and must be approached through attentive participation rather than conceptual mastery.

Such an understanding has profound ecological implications. Rather than positioning nature as an external object available for possession or control, the *Dao De Jing* repeatedly encourages human beings to model themselves upon the spontaneous processes of the natural world. Chapter 25 presents one of the most frequently cited formulations of this cosmological relationship: "Humanity follows Earth; Earth follows Heaven; Heaven follows the Dao; the Dao follows what is naturally so" (*Dao De Jing*, ch. 25). The sequence does not construct a hierarchy of domination but describes a continuum of relational dependence in which every level of existence derives its vitality through responsiveness to larger ecological processes.

The Daoist concept of *ziran* (自然) commonly translated as "naturalness," "self-so," or "spontaneity," occupies a central position within this cosmology. Rather than referring simply to untouched wilderness, *ziran* designates the capacity of beings to realise their own patterns of existence without coercion or artificial interference. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall argue that *ziran* should be understood as an expression of relational creativity rather than passive naturalism because every being continuously emerges through its interactions with others (Ames and Hall). Nature therefore becomes a field of reciprocal becoming rather than a collection of isolated objects.

Closely connected to *ziran* is the celebrated Daoist principle of *wu wei* (無為). Frequently translated as "non-action," the expression has often been misunderstood within Western scholarship as advocating passivity or withdrawal. Contemporary interpreters have instead demonstrated that *wu wei* signifies responsive, non-coercive action that operates in harmony with existing patterns rather than through forceful intervention (Slingerland). Action guided by *wu wei* is effective precisely because it avoids domination. Water serves as the most prominent illustration of this principle in the *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 8 observes that the highest excellence resembles water because water benefits the myriad beings while contending with none (*Dao De Jing*, ch. 8). Water nourishes without possessing, adapts without surrendering its identity, and transforms landscapes through persistence rather than violence.

This vegetal and hydrological orientation is equally evident in the *Zhuangzi*, where plants, trees, birds, insects, rivers, and mountains repeatedly become philosophical interlocutors rather than decorative imagery. The famous dialogue concerning the "useless tree" challenges conventional utilitarian assumptions by demonstrating that value cannot be measured solely according to human purposes (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 4). The tree survives precisely because it escapes instrumental exploitation, revealing an alternative ethics in which existence possesses significance beyond economic usefulness. Similarly, the "Happy Fish" dialogue questions the assumption that human knowledge occupies a privileged epistemological position, suggesting instead that understanding emerges through relational participation rather than detached observation (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 17).

These examples reveal that Daoist philosophy consistently decentralises the human subject. The natural world is not represented as silent matter awaiting human interpretation but as a community of living presences whose existence continually reshapes human understanding. Such a perspective resonates strongly with recent developments in plant humanities. Michael Marder argues that plants challenge philosophical traditions built upon mobility, individuality, and hierarchical consciousness because vegetal life embodies distributed forms of relational existence (Marder). Likewise, Matthew Hall contends that many philosophical and Indigenous traditions recognise plants as active participants within ethical communities rather than passive biological resources (Hall). Although these scholars write from contemporary philosophical

perspectives rather than classical Daoism, their work demonstrates the continuing relevance of vegetal thinking for ecological ethics.

The present study builds upon these philosophical insights while advancing a distinct literary framework. Daoist Phytopedagogy, as proposed here, does not suggest that plants literally teach through language or intentional instruction. Instead, it argues that literature can represent vegetal existence as a pedagogical mode through which readers learn alternative forms of attention, temporality, reciprocity, and coexistence. The pedagogical force of plants lies not in anthropomorphic speech but in the ethical possibilities disclosed through their modes of being. Growth without domination, rootedness without possession, endurance without aggression, and regeneration without spectacle become literary lessons that challenge anthropocentric habits of reading.

Within this framework, learning is fundamentally relational. Knowledge is not transmitted vertically from an authoritative teacher to passive recipients but emerges through encounters with the more-than-human world. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore redefines literary education as an ecological practice in which rivers, forests, mountains, and plants participate in the formation of ethical consciousness. Such a conception moves beyond metaphorical readings of vegetation by recognising vegetal life as an epistemic presence that transforms the reader's understanding of coexistence.

This theoretical foundation provides an appropriate framework for approaching Mamang Dai's River Poems. Although Dai writes from the Indigenous cosmological traditions of Arunachal Pradesh rather than from Daoist philosophy, her poetry repeatedly imagines rivers, forests, trees, and mountains as living participants in cultural memory and ecological responsibility. The comparative dialogue developed in this article therefore seeks neither to assimilate Indigenous knowledge into Daoism nor to dissolve their historical differences. Instead, it demonstrates how two distinct traditions converge in affirming that the natural world is not merely represented in literature but actively shapes the ethical conditions through which literature itself becomes a form of ecological learning.

1.2 Reading River Poems: Vegetal Agency and the Pedagogy of the Living Landscape

The theoretical framework of Daoist Phytopedagogy becomes particularly illuminating when applied to Mamang Dai's River Poems. Although the collection is deeply rooted in the Indigenous cosmology of the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh, its poetic imagination repeatedly constructs landscapes in which rivers, trees, forests, rain, mountains, stones, flowers, and birds are neither decorative scenery nor symbolic extensions of human consciousness. Instead, they emerge as living presences through which knowledge is remembered, ethical relations are negotiated, and cultural identity is continually renewed. Such an ecological imagination resonates with the Daoist conviction that the human being exists within, rather than above, the continuous movement of the Dao. Consequently, the poems invite readers to enter what this study terms vegetal learning—a mode of literary education grounded in attentiveness to the more-than-human world.

One of the defining characteristics of Daoist philosophy is its refusal to separate cosmology from everyday existence. The Dao De Jing repeatedly suggests that wisdom emerges through close observation of natural processes rather than through abstraction or domination (Dao De Jing, chs. 8, 25). Mamang Dai's poetry similarly rejects anthropocentric narration by allowing the landscape itself to become the principal bearer of memory. In "The Missing Link," the river is presented not merely as a geographical feature but as the historical bloodstream of an entire civilisation:

"The river was the green and white vein of our lives" (Dai 11).

The metaphor of the "green and white vein" radically redefines landscape. The river functions not as an external object but as the circulatory system of communal existence. Vegetation, water, and human memory become inseparable. Such imagery closely parallels the Daoist understanding that life flows through continuous relational processes rather than discrete entities. The river is simultaneously ecological, historical, and epistemological; it teaches identity through movement rather than permanence.

The closing movement of the same poem further develops this pedagogy by insisting that memory itself originates within the river's voice. Dai asks:

"Where else could we belong / if not of memory" (11–12).

Belonging here is not territorial possession but ecological remembrance. The poem does not describe humans remembering the river; instead, memory becomes a property of the river itself. This reversal is philosophically significant. Daoist Phytopedagogy argues that such moments decentralise human cognition by recognising the landscape as an active participant in the production of knowledge.

The title poem, "River Poems," intensifies this relational ontology through the language of silence. The opening declaration,

"Without speech / we practised a craft" (Dai 13),

immediately rejects the assumption that language alone constitutes knowledge. Instead, the community learns by reading "the seasons," "the trailing mist," and "silent messages / across the vast landscape" (Dai 13). The landscape therefore functions as a text whose grammar is ecological rather than linguistic. Such a conception bears striking affinity with the Daoist appreciation of *ziran*, wherein nature reveals itself through spontaneous processes that resist conceptual control. Learning consequently arises through attentive participation instead of analytical mastery.

The second movement of the poem introduces one of the most remarkable vegetal images in the collection:

"The flash of summer revealed / intricate nature, / divinity in trees" (Dai 13).

The phrase "divinity in trees" represents far more than poetic personification. Trees become manifestations of sacred presence rather than objects receiving symbolic meaning from human observers. Daoist philosophy similarly refuses to separate spirituality from natural processes. Chapter 25 of the *Dao De Jing* situates all beings within the generative movement of the *Dao*, suggesting that natural existence itself constitutes sacred order. Dai's arboreal imagery therefore resonates not because it imitates Daoist thought but because both traditions understand vegetal life as intrinsically meaningful.

This vegetal epistemology appears with even greater clarity in "A Stone Breaks the Sleeping Water." The speaker expresses a desire not for wealth or social power but for an inheritance rooted in arboreal continuity:

"I wish I had inherited fruit trees, / Tall, full-grown trees / with flowering branches and ancient roots" (Dai 21).

The image of "ancient roots" is especially significant within Daoist Phytopedagogy. Roots symbolise neither nostalgia nor static origin. Instead, they embody continuity through growth. Their pedagogical value lies precisely in demonstrating how permanence and transformation coexist. The tree teaches duration without rigidity, stability without domination. The subsequent movement toward "the course of a river" and "each simple hour / protected by innocence" (Dai 21) further suggests that ethical maturity is learned through ecological rhythms rather than institutional instruction.

Rain functions throughout the collection as another vegetal teacher. In the poem "Rain," precipitation is not merely meteorological; it becomes an ecological archive:

"In the sound of the rain / is contained / all the spirit of the jungle" (Dai 25).

Rain gathers together forest, memory, regeneration, and spiritual vitality within a single ecological event. The poem continues by observing that "the camellias bloom" while "the incense of pine / fills the senses again" (Dai 25). The flowering camellia and fragrant pine are not passive botanical details; they actively restore equilibrium, so that "the scales are balanced / between joy and pain" (Dai 25). This image of balance recalls the Daoist preference for dynamic harmony over fixed opposition. Ecological learning therefore consists not in eliminating suffering but in recognising the reciprocal movements through which life continually renews itself.

The shorter poem "Rain (2)" reinforces this insight through extraordinary economy. Dai writes:

"The rain has its own method" (Dai 26).

The statement is deceptively simple. By attributing its own "method" to rain, the poem recognises autonomous natural agency. The following observation that "The green tree grows taller" (Dai 26) presents vegetal growth as the consequence of this independent ecological intelligence rather than human intervention. Such imagery closely parallels *wu wei*, wherein transformation unfolds through responsive participation instead of external coercion.

Perhaps the most explicit articulation of Daoist Phytopedagogy occurs in "Small Towns and the River." The repeated declaration,

"The river has a soul" (Dai 29),

fundamentally challenges modern mechanistic understandings of nature. The river "knows," it "holds its breath," and ultimately "knows / the immortality of water" (Dai 29). Knowledge here belongs not exclusively to human consciousness but to ecological existence itself. Water becomes simultaneously memory, teacher, and philosopher. The poem thus dissolves the epistemological hierarchy separating human subject from natural object, affirming instead a shared field of relational intelligence.

Across these poems, Dai consistently relocates pedagogy from classrooms and institutions to rivers, forests, rain, mountains, and trees. Learning occurs through observation, patience, reciprocity, and participation within ecological processes. This educational philosophy converges remarkably with Daoist understandings of naturalness without collapsing Indigenous cosmology into Daoist metaphysics. The comparison instead reveals a shared ecological grammar in which vegetal life becomes an active source of ethical formation. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore identifies not merely the representation of plants in literature but the emergence of literature itself as a site where vegetal existence educates human perception. In River Poems, forests do not simply surround the community; they cultivate it. Trees do not merely symbolise endurance; they teach it. Rivers do not simply flow through the landscape; they shape memory, identity, and the ethical imagination. Through these living pedagogies, Mamang Dai's poetry invites readers to inhabit an ecological consciousness grounded in humility, relationality, and coexistence—the very qualities that classical Daoism recognises as the deepest expressions of living in accordance with the Dao.

1.3 Arboreal Pedagogy: Trees, Roots, and the Dao of Learning

The theoretical significance of Daoist Phytopedagogy becomes more apparent when the vegetal imagery of River Poems is examined as a coherent epistemological system rather than as isolated poetic ornamentation. Throughout the collection, Mamang Dai repeatedly returns to trees, roots, flowers, bamboo, leaves, forests, and seasonal vegetation as living presences that educate human consciousness. The poems neither anthropomorphise plants nor reduce them to decorative metaphors. Instead, vegetal life embodies an autonomous rhythm through which ethical knowledge, cultural continuity, and ecological responsibility are gradually disclosed. Such an understanding closely corresponds to the Daoist conviction that wisdom is not imposed upon nature but discovered by participating in its spontaneous transformations.

Classical Daoism consistently privileges observation over domination. The Dao De Jing repeatedly urges human beings to learn from the natural world because nature accomplishes its purposes "without striving" (wu wei) while remaining perfectly responsive to change (Dao De Jing, chs. 37, 48). Vegetation occupies an important place within this cosmology because plants reveal growth without coercion. A tree neither competes with the mountain nor resists the river; it flourishes by responding to seasonal rhythms. Learning therefore becomes an ecological process rather than an accumulation of information. Daoist Phytopedagogy extends this philosophical insight into literary studies by arguing that vegetal life itself functions as an educational model for reading.

This pedagogical orientation appears almost immediately in "River Poems," where Dai observes that the community learned to read "the seasons," "the trailing mist," and "silent messages / across the vast landscape" (Dai 13). The striking feature of these lines is that learning occurs before speech acquires authority. Silence does not signify absence but attentiveness. Knowledge emerges through ecological participation rather than linguistic instruction. Such a conception parallels the opening movement of the Dao De Jing, where ultimate reality exceeds verbal definition and must instead be approached through lived responsiveness (Dao De Jing, ch. 1). The poem consequently relocates education from institutional spaces into the living environment itself.

This ecological pedagogy reaches one of its fullest expressions in the poem "A Stone Breaks the Sleeping Water." Rather than desiring material inheritance, the speaker longs for "fruit trees," "flowering branches," and "ancient roots" (Dai 21). The inheritance imagined here is neither economic nor genealogical; it is vegetal. Trees become repositories of time, continuity, and intergenerational memory. Their "ancient roots" simultaneously penetrate the earth and preserve historical consciousness, suggesting that genuine education begins by recognising one's embeddedness within ecological history.

The symbolism of roots deserves particular attention because it anticipates the central argument of Daoist Phytopedagogy. Roots are invisible yet indispensable. They sustain the visible tree while remaining hidden beneath the soil. Similarly, ecological wisdom often operates beneath the surface of everyday consciousness. Daoist philosophy repeatedly associates profundity with hiddenness, valleys, water, and roots rather than with spectacle or dominance. Chapter 6 of the *Dao De Jing* famously describes the inexhaustible generative source through the imagery of the mysterious valley, while later chapters associate rootedness with stability and longevity (*Dao De Jing*, chs. 6, 59). Dai's arboreal imagination participates in a comparable epistemology. The visible landscape derives its vitality from unseen relationships extending through memory, ancestry, soil, and seasonal regeneration.

The educational significance of trees is equally evident in the poem "Rain." The poem begins by observing that "all the spirit of the jungle" is contained within rainfall before moving naturally towards vegetal renewal as "the camellias bloom" and "the incense of pine / fills the senses again" (Dai 25). These botanical references perform far more than descriptive functions. Camellia and pine become indicators of ecological restoration. Rain is represented not merely as weather but as a pedagogical event through which the forest instructs human perception regarding balance, renewal, and reciprocity. The concluding image of the "scales" balancing "between joy and pain" suggests that ecological maturity consists not in overcoming contradiction but in inhabiting it (Dai 25).

This relational understanding closely resembles the Daoist rejection of rigid binaries. Rather than opposing joy to suffering or growth to decay, Daoism understands each process as emerging through the dynamic transformation of the other. Vegetation exemplifies precisely this rhythm. Blossoming presupposes dormancy; renewal follows decomposition; growth depends upon continual change. Dai's poetry repeatedly situates human existence within this vegetal temporality, thereby transforming plants into ethical teachers.

Perhaps the most concise formulation of this principle appears in "Rain (2)," where the poet remarks that "The rain has its own method" before quietly observing that "The green tree grows taller" (Dai 26). The brevity of these lines enhances their philosophical force. Neither rain nor tree requires human supervision. Growth unfolds through intrinsic ecological relationships already present within the natural world. Daoist *wu wei* similarly proposes that effective action respects existing patterns rather than imposing external control. The poem therefore illustrates one of the central propositions of Daoist Phytopedagogy: plants teach precisely because they do not instruct in the conventional sense. Their silent persistence embodies an ethics of becoming.

The educational function of bamboo receives especially subtle treatment in "Images." Reflecting upon memory, the speaker notices "the day's limbs that bamboo bends / aching to break, / but the wind changes direction / every time, testing green resilience" (Dai 31). Bamboo has long occupied an important position within East Asian philosophical traditions because its flexibility symbolises strength achieved through responsiveness rather than rigidity. Although Dai employs bamboo within an Indigenous Himalayan landscape rather than an explicitly Daoist symbolic system, the image nevertheless illustrates a comparable ecological principle. Resilience does not arise from resisting change but from adapting to it. The wind functions as teacher, while bamboo demonstrates that endurance depends upon flexibility.

This interpretation acquires additional significance when considered alongside the poem "Remembrance." There, Dai recalls how "the green fern would uncurl / ceaselessly, by the roadside" before questioning why human beings once believed survival to be permanent (Dai 16). The fern's continual unfolding contrasts sharply with human assumptions regarding permanence. Vegetation accepts cyclical transformation, whereas human consciousness often seeks stability beyond ecological reality. The poem therefore invites readers to learn from vegetal temporality rather than attempting to escape it. Such learning exemplifies the Daoist preference for process over fixed identity.

Floral imagery throughout the collection further extends this vegetal pedagogy. Magnolias, chrysanthemums, lilies, peonies, camellias, and red flowers repeatedly appear at moments of emotional or ethical transition. These flowers rarely function as conventional romantic symbols. Instead, they register seasonal consciousness, mortality, remembrance, and renewal. In "A Stone Breaks the Sleeping Water," the white magnolia becomes associated with "perfect joy" and "the brushstrokes of my transformed heart" (Dai 21). Transformation here is neither psychological

nor purely symbolic; it follows ecological rhythm. The flowering tree educates perception by demonstrating that beauty emerges through cyclical regeneration rather than permanence.

Leaves likewise acquire philosophical significance. Their annual emergence, flourishing, and disappearance exemplify impermanence without suggesting loss. Daoist cosmology similarly regards change as intrinsic to the continuity of the Dao. What appears as disappearance from one perspective constitutes transformation from another. Dai repeatedly returns to this logic throughout *River Poems*, presenting seasonal vegetation as evidence that ecological continuity depends upon perpetual renewal rather than static preservation.

Consequently, the vegetal world in *River Poems* should not be interpreted as a repository of symbols awaiting human interpretation. Trees, flowers, roots, bamboo, rain, and forests instead constitute what may be described as an ecological curriculum. Each plant form embodies a particular ethical disposition: roots teach continuity; bamboo teaches resilience; rain teaches reciprocity; flowers teach renewal; forests teach relational coexistence. Collectively, they produce an alternative pedagogy grounded not in mastery but in participation.

This insight constitutes the central contribution of Daoist Phytopedagogy. Whereas conventional literary pedagogy often privileges textual interpretation as an exclusively human activity, Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes that literature itself stages encounters with vegetal intelligence capable of reshaping the reader's ethical imagination. Mamang Dai's poetry neither romanticises nor idealises nature. Rather, it demonstrates that ecological learning occurs when human consciousness relinquishes its claim to epistemological supremacy and enters into reciprocal dialogue with the living landscape. In this sense, the trees of *River Poems* are not merely represented within poetry; they become educators whose silent presence transforms literature into an ecology of learning.

1.4 Rivers, Memory, and Wu Wei: Reimagining Literary Learning through Ecological Relationality

Having established that the arboreal world in *River Poems* constitutes an ecological pedagogy, it is equally important to examine the philosophical role of rivers within Mamang Dai's poetic imagination. Throughout the collection, rivers function neither as geographical boundaries nor as conventional literary motifs. Rather, they constitute dynamic epistemological spaces in which movement, memory, history, and ethical responsibility converge. Read alongside Daoist philosophy, these fluvial landscapes illuminate an alternative conception of literary learning founded upon relational flow rather than fixed knowledge. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore extends beyond vegetal imagery alone to include the hydrological processes that sustain vegetal existence, revealing that ecological education emerges through the reciprocal interaction of water, forests, mountains, and human communities.

Classical Daoism repeatedly identifies water as the most complete embodiment of the Dao. Unlike rigid structures that resist transformation, water remains responsive to every contour while retaining its essential character. Chapter 8 of the *Dao De Jing* famously describes the highest excellence as resembling water because it benefits all beings without contention (*Dao De Jing*, ch. 8). Water nourishes life without seeking recognition, occupies the lowest places rejected by others, and accomplishes transformation through persistence rather than force. This understanding fundamentally challenges anthropocentric notions of power by replacing domination with responsiveness. Ecological wisdom, from a Daoist perspective, therefore lies not in controlling natural processes but in learning from their modes of operation.

Mamang Dai repeatedly imagines rivers according to a remarkably similar ecological logic. The river is presented as a living continuum through which generations inherit cultural memory without reducing that inheritance to static tradition. Rather than existing outside history, the river becomes history's principal witness. Communities emerge, disappear, migrate, and transform, yet the river continues to carry their stories forward. Consequently, memory in *River Poems* is never exclusively human. It circulates through landscapes, forests, stones, rainfall, and flowing water. Literary learning thus becomes an encounter with ecological memory rather than merely textual interpretation.

This displacement of human centrality represents one of the most significant intersections between Daoist philosophy and Dai's Indigenous ecological imagination. Both traditions resist the assumption that knowledge originates exclusively within rational human consciousness. Instead, they recognise the environment itself as an active participant in the formation of

understanding. Rivers remember because they endure beyond individual lives. Mountains instruct because they embody temporal scales exceeding human history. Forests preserve relationships that remain inaccessible to purely instrumental forms of knowledge. Such a worldview transforms literature into an ecology of listening rather than an exercise in interpretive mastery.

Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes that this transformation fundamentally alters the nature of education itself. Conventional pedagogical models frequently assume that knowledge moves unidirectionally from teacher to student, from text to reader, or from culture to nature. By contrast, *River Poems* consistently reverses these relationships. The reader is invited not to explain the landscape but to be instructed by it. Ecological knowledge arises through humility, attentiveness, and sustained participation within living environments. Such learning closely resembles the Daoist principle of *wu wei*, where effectiveness depends not upon imposing one's will but upon responding appropriately to existing patterns.

The philosophical implications of this educational model extend beyond environmental ethics into literary methodology itself. If rivers, forests, and plants possess pedagogical significance, then literary criticism must reconsider its own interpretive practices. Rather than treating nature as symbolic material awaiting human explanation, criticism becomes an act of ecological dialogue. The critic no longer occupies a position of detached authority but participates within the relational field established by the literary text. Reading itself becomes an ecological event.

This methodological shift also distinguishes Daoist Phytopedagogy from several influential approaches within contemporary ecocriticism. Early ecocritical scholarship frequently concentrated upon representations of wilderness, environmental crisis, or pastoral imagination. Although these perspectives remain valuable, Daoist Phytopedagogy directs attention toward the pedagogical capacities of vegetal existence itself. Plants are not examined solely because they appear within literature but because their modes of being disclose alternative epistemologies. Rootedness, regeneration, seasonal transformation, symbiosis, and ecological interdependence become models through which literature teaches readers to inhabit the world differently.

Recent developments within plant humanities reinforce this perspective. Michael Marder argues that vegetal life challenges deeply entrenched philosophical assumptions regarding individuality, intentionality, and consciousness by revealing distributed forms of existence grounded in relationality (Marder). Likewise, Matthew Hall demonstrates that numerous Indigenous and religious traditions recognise plants as ethical participants rather than biological resources (Hall). Daoist Phytopedagogy builds upon these insights while advancing a specifically literary framework. Instead of asking what literature says about plants, it asks how plants reorganise the very conditions through which literature educates its readers.

Within *River Poems*, this pedagogical reorganisation occurs through a gradual displacement of anthropocentric temporality. Human narratives remain important, yet they unfold within ecological cycles whose duration exceeds individual biography. Rivers continue flowing after human conflicts have ceased. Trees survive political transitions. Seasonal vegetation repeatedly returns despite historical violence. Such temporal multiplicity encourages readers to abandon linear models of progress in favour of cyclical, regenerative understandings of existence. Daoist philosophy similarly rejects teleological conceptions of history by emphasising continual transformation rather than final destinations. The Dao has no ultimate endpoint because reality itself consists of perpetual becoming.

Equally significant is Dai's refusal to separate aesthetic experience from ecological ethics. Beauty within *River Poems* never exists independently of responsibility. Landscapes become beautiful precisely because they sustain relationships among human communities, ancestral memory, plants, animals, and rivers. Consequently, aesthetic appreciation becomes inseparable from ethical attentiveness. Daoist philosophy offers a comparable vision in which harmony is simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and cosmological. The beautiful landscape is not valuable because it pleases human observers but because it manifests balanced relationships among diverse forms of existence.

This convergence should not, however, be understood as evidence of direct philosophical influence. The Indigenous cosmologies informing Mamang Dai's poetry possess their own histories, ceremonial practices, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge systems. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore operates as a comparative hermeneutic rather than a theory of cultural

transmission. Its purpose is not to assimilate one tradition into another but to illuminate shared ecological insights capable of enriching contemporary literary studies. Comparative philosophy becomes productive precisely when it preserves historical specificity while recognising conceptual resonance.

The pedagogical implications of this comparative framework are particularly significant for environmental humanities. As ecological crises intensify across the globe, educational institutions increasingly seek methodologies capable of cultivating environmental responsibility without reducing ecology to scientific information alone. Literature occupies a crucial position within this process because it reshapes imagination before it transforms policy. River Poems demonstrates that ecological consciousness develops through affective, ethical, and sensory engagement with living landscapes. Daoist philosophy similarly maintains that genuine wisdom cannot be separated from the cultivation of disposition. Knowledge and character therefore evolve together.

Daoist Phytopedagogy ultimately proposes that literature becomes transformative when readers learn to inhabit the rhythms of the more-than-human world rather than merely interpreting representations of nature. Rivers teach continuity without permanence. Forests teach community without uniformity. Trees teach endurance without domination. Rain teaches renewal without possession. These lessons are neither allegorical nor sentimental; they emerge from sustained attention to ecological processes themselves. Mamang Dai's poetry therefore exemplifies a literary practice in which environmental learning proceeds through relational participation instead of abstract instruction.

By foregrounding these ecological modes of learning, River Poems expands the possibilities of comparative environmental humanities. The dialogue established here between Daoist philosophy and Indigenous ecological poetics demonstrates that geographically and historically distinct traditions may nevertheless converge in challenging anthropocentric assumptions and in affirming the educational significance of the living world. Daoist Phytopedagogy thus redefines literary learning as an ongoing ethical encounter with vegetal, fluvial, and atmospheric communities whose shared vitality continually reshapes human understanding. Through this framework, literature becomes not simply a representation of ecological consciousness but one of its most enduring forms of cultivation.

1.5 Toward a Theory of Daoist Phytopedagogy: Reimagining Literary Learning Beyond Anthropocentrism

The preceding discussions have demonstrated that Mamang Dai's River Poems consistently imagines rivers, forests, trees, flowers, rain, and mountains as active participants in the formation of ecological consciousness. These recurring vegetal and fluvial presences invite a broader theoretical reconsideration of what literary learning itself entails. The central argument of this article is therefore that literature does not merely represent ecological knowledge; rather, it can become an ecological pedagogy through which readers gradually learn new modes of perception, relationality, and ethical responsibility. This pedagogical transformation is conceptualised here as Daoist Phytopedagogy—a theoretical framework that understands vegetal existence as an epistemic presence capable of reshaping literary consciousness through the philosophical principles of the Dao.

Unlike conventional literary pedagogy, which frequently privileges interpretation, symbolism, or historical contextualisation, Daoist Phytopedagogy begins from a different premise. It assumes that literary knowledge is fundamentally relational rather than representational. Reading is not simply an intellectual activity performed upon a text; it is an encounter between human consciousness and the living worlds disclosed through literature. Consequently, learning emerges not through the accumulation of information but through the gradual cultivation of ecological attentiveness.

This proposition resonates closely with the Daoist understanding of the Dao as an ever-unfolding process rather than a fixed metaphysical entity. The Dao De Jing repeatedly suggests that wisdom arises through responsiveness to natural processes rather than through attempts to dominate them (Dao De Jing, chs. 16, 25, 37). Human beings therefore learn by observing how rivers flow, how trees grow, how valleys receive water, and how seasons continually transform the landscape. Nature itself becomes a philosophical text whose lessons cannot be separated from lived experience.

Mamang Dai's poetry repeatedly embodies precisely this educational process. Her poems rarely instruct readers through direct moral assertion. Instead, they cultivate habits of attention. The reader is encouraged to observe the movement of rain through forest canopies, the quiet endurance of ancient trees, the cyclical return of flowering plants, and the persistent memory carried by rivers. Such observations gradually reorganise the reader's perception of ecological reality. Rather than occupying the centre of existence, the human subject becomes one participant within a larger community of living beings.

This decentralisation of human authority constitutes one of the defining characteristics of Daoist Phytopedagogy. The framework rejects the anthropocentric assumption that knowledge originates exclusively within human consciousness. Instead, it proposes that ecological understanding emerges through reciprocal relationships among diverse forms of life. Trees become teachers not because they communicate through human language but because their modes of existence disclose ethical possibilities inaccessible to purely anthropocentric reasoning. Their rootedness teaches continuity; their seasonal regeneration teaches resilience; their silent growth teaches patience; their coexistence within forest ecosystems teaches relational interdependence.

Recent developments within plant studies reinforce the significance of this perspective. Michael Marder argues that Western philosophy has historically neglected vegetal existence because it privileges mobility, individuality, and intentional consciousness over the distributed life of plants (Marder). Matthew Hall similarly demonstrates that numerous Indigenous and religious traditions recognise plants as members of ethical communities rather than passive biological resources (Hall). Daoist Phytopedagogy extends these discussions by situating vegetal agency within literary pedagogy itself. Plants do not merely become subjects of literary representation; they transform the conditions under which literature educates its readers.

This transformation also requires a reconsideration of the role of the reader. Traditional literary criticism often assumes that meaning is produced through analytical mastery. Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes instead that reading resembles ecological participation. The reader approaches the text with humility, openness, and attentiveness, allowing the rhythms of the literary landscape gradually to reshape perception. Such an approach reflects the Daoist principle of *wu wei*, where understanding develops through responsive engagement rather than interpretive domination. Reading therefore becomes analogous to walking through a forest or listening to the continuous movement of a river: one participates before one explains.

An equally significant aspect of Daoist Phytopedagogy concerns temporality. Modern educational systems frequently privilege measurable outcomes, linear progression, and rapid acquisition of knowledge. Vegetal life, however, unfolds according to different temporal rhythms. Trees require decades to mature; forests evolve over centuries; rivers reshape landscapes across geological time. Mamang Dai repeatedly situates human experience within these extended ecological durations, reminding readers that genuine learning often proceeds slowly through sustained relationships with place. Daoist philosophy similarly values cyclical transformation over linear progress, emphasising continual becoming rather than final achievement.

The pedagogical implications of this ecological temporality are considerable. Education ceases to be conceived as the transmission of information and instead becomes the cultivation of disposition. Ecological literacy depends not merely upon knowing environmental facts but upon developing habits of perception capable of recognising the intrinsic value of more-than-human life. Literature contributes uniquely to this process because it engages imagination, emotion, memory, and ethical reflection simultaneously. *River Poems* therefore functions as an ecological classroom in which rivers, trees, flowers, mountains, rain, and ancestral landscapes become co-teachers within an expanded educational community.

Importantly, Daoist Phytopedagogy should not be understood as replacing Indigenous ecological philosophies with Daoist concepts. The comparative framework developed in this article deliberately preserves the historical integrity of both traditions. Mamang Dai's poetry emerges from the Adi worldview of Arunachal Pradesh, with its own cosmological foundations, oral traditions, and ecological practices. Daoism likewise possesses its own philosophical genealogy within classical Chinese thought. The value of comparison lies not in collapsing

difference but in revealing convergent modes of ecological reasoning that enrich contemporary environmental humanities.

This comparative orientation also distinguishes Daoist Phytopedagogy from universalist environmental theories that risk overlooking cultural specificity. Instead of proposing a single ecological worldview, the framework demonstrates how distinct intellectual traditions independently arrive at relational understandings of life, interdependence, and environmental responsibility. Such convergence suggests that ecological ethics need not depend upon identical philosophical premises. Rather, diverse traditions may contribute complementary insights toward a more comprehensive understanding of planetary coexistence.

From this perspective, Daoist Phytopedagogy offers three principal contributions to literary scholarship. First, it reconceptualises plants as epistemic participants rather than symbolic objects. Second, it redefines literary learning as an ecological practice grounded in relational attentiveness rather than interpretive mastery. Third, it establishes a comparative philosophical methodology through which Daoist and Indigenous ecological traditions may enter into productive dialogue while retaining their respective historical identities.

Ultimately, the significance of Daoist Phytopedagogy extends beyond the interpretation of Mamang Dai's poetry. It proposes a broader reorientation of literary education itself. At a historical moment characterised by accelerating biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, and climate instability, literature possesses the capacity not merely to describe environmental crisis but to cultivate the dispositions necessary for ecological coexistence. By learning with trees rather than merely about them, by listening to rivers rather than simply representing them, and by recognising forests as communities rather than resources, readers begin to inhabit a form of ecological literacy grounded in humility, reciprocity, and relational care. In this sense, Daoist Phytopedagogy is not only a method of reading literature; it is an invitation to rethink what it means to learn within a living world.

1.6 Comparative Ecologies: Daoism and the Indigenous Cosmology of Arunachal Pradesh

The theoretical value of Daoist Phytopedagogy ultimately depends upon its capacity to establish a rigorous comparative dialogue without dissolving the philosophical distinctiveness of the traditions it brings together. Comparative philosophy has frequently been criticised for imposing conceptual frameworks derived from one culture upon another, thereby obscuring historical specificity. Such concerns are particularly relevant when examining Indigenous ecological traditions alongside classical Chinese philosophy. The objective of the present study, however, is neither to argue that Mamang Dai consciously appropriates Daoist philosophy nor to suggest that the Adi worldview of Arunachal Pradesh derives from Chinese intellectual traditions. Rather, the comparison proceeds phenomenologically and hermeneutically, identifying convergent ecological orientations while preserving the autonomy of each knowledge system. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore functions as a comparative interpretive framework rather than a theory of historical influence.

Both Daoism and the Indigenous cosmologies represented in River Poems begin by questioning the ontological separation between humanity and the natural world. Classical Western humanism has frequently defined the human through distinction from nature, attributing rationality, language, and culture exclusively to human beings while reducing plants, rivers, forests, and mountains to passive objects of knowledge. By contrast, both Daoist philosophy and the ecological imagination informing Mamang Dai's poetry reject this dualistic structure. Human existence is understood as one manifestation within a larger community of living relationships whose integrity depends upon reciprocity rather than hierarchy.

The Dao De Jing repeatedly emphasises that human beings should model themselves upon the spontaneous order of the natural world. Chapter 25 presents the celebrated sequence in which humanity follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is naturally so (Dao De Jing, ch. 25). This formulation does not elevate humanity above creation but situates human life within an ecological continuum governed by relational balance. Nature is not external to civilisation; it constitutes the very condition of human flourishing.

A comparable ecological orientation permeates Mamang Dai's poetry. Rivers are represented as ancestral memory, forests preserve communal identity, rainfall sustains both ecological and spiritual renewal, while trees embody continuity across generations. Human beings do not occupy the centre of these landscapes. Instead, they exist within them as participants whose

identity emerges through ongoing relationships with rivers, mountains, forests, birds, and plants. The poems repeatedly refuse to isolate individual consciousness from environmental processes, thereby producing what may be described as a relational ontology comparable to that articulated within Daoist philosophy.

Despite these philosophical resonances, significant differences remain. Daoism develops its ecological vision primarily through cosmological reflection concerning the Dao as the generative process underlying all existence. The Indigenous worldview represented in River Poems, by contrast, emerges from oral traditions, ritual practices, ancestral memory, and everyday relationships with specific landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. Rivers, forests, and mountains possess significance not because they illustrate abstract metaphysical principles but because they participate directly in communal history and lived experience. Consequently, ecological knowledge remains inseparable from place.

This distinction is crucial for comparative methodology. Daoist Phytopedagogy does not attempt to translate Indigenous cosmology into Daoist terminology. Rather, Daoist concepts provide philosophical lenses through which certain ecological dynamics become newly intelligible. The comparison therefore remains dialogical rather than assimilative. Each tradition retains its conceptual integrity while contributing to a broader understanding of ecological relationality.

The concept of *ziran* offers a particularly productive point of comparison. Within Daoist philosophy, *ziran* signifies spontaneous self-realisation according to one's own intrinsic pattern rather than conformity to externally imposed structures. The principle does not advocate passivity but affirms the creative unfolding of life through non-coercive relationships. Mamang Dai's landscapes similarly resist artificial separation between human culture and ecological process. Forests regenerate according to seasonal rhythms; rivers carry memory without human intervention; rain renews both vegetation and emotional life. These recurring images suggest an ecological order that remains fundamentally self-organising. Human flourishing depends upon participating within these processes rather than attempting to dominate them.

The Daoist principle of *wu wei* likewise finds important ecological resonance within Dai's poetry. Frequently misunderstood as inactivity, *wu wei* instead refers to responsive action aligned with existing patterns of reality. Water provides the most familiar Daoist illustration because it transforms landscapes through persistence rather than force. Dai repeatedly employs rivers according to a remarkably similar ethical logic. Water nourishes communities, preserves ancestral memory, and sustains forests without asserting mastery over them. The educational significance of this imagery lies precisely in its rejection of coercive power. Ecological responsibility arises through participation rather than possession.

Vegetation further strengthens this comparative dialogue. Throughout River Poems, trees are associated with endurance, continuity, rootedness, and regeneration. Their significance extends beyond symbolic representation because they actively shape the moral imagination of both speaker and reader. Daoist philosophy similarly accords particular importance to vegetal life. Trees repeatedly appear within the Zhuangzi as philosophical interlocutors whose existence challenges utilitarian assumptions regarding value. The celebrated "useless tree" survives precisely because it escapes instrumental exploitation (Zhuangzi, ch. 4). Its apparent uselessness reveals a deeper critique of anthropocentric systems that evaluate nature exclusively according to economic productivity.

Mamang Dai's arboreal imagination develops a comparable ethical insight, although from an Indigenous rather than Daoist perspective. Trees preserve cultural continuity because they outlive individual generations. Their roots connect present communities with ancestral landscapes, while their seasonal renewal demonstrates that continuity depends upon transformation rather than permanence. Daoist Phytopedagogy interprets these vegetal relationships not simply as literary symbols but as educational encounters through which readers gradually acquire ecological dispositions of patience, humility, resilience, and reciprocity.

The comparison also illuminates differing understandings of temporality. Modern industrial societies frequently privilege acceleration, productivity, and measurable progress. Daoist philosophy proposes instead a cyclical understanding of transformation in which beginnings and endings continuously generate one another. Similarly, Mamang Dai's poetry repeatedly situates human experience within seasonal, arboreal, and hydrological rhythms that exceed

individual lifetimes. Rivers continue flowing across generations, forests regenerate after disturbance, and rainfall repeatedly renews ecological communities. Such temporal multiplicity encourages readers to adopt what may be called ecological patience, recognising that genuine learning unfolds gradually through sustained relationships with living environments.

This shared emphasis upon temporality has significant pedagogical implications. Contemporary educational institutions often measure learning through immediate outcomes, quantifiable achievement, and accelerated acquisition of knowledge. Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes an alternative educational philosophy modelled upon vegetal growth. Trees do not become forests overnight. Roots develop invisibly before branches become visible. Flowers bloom only after extended processes of seasonal preparation. Ecological literacy therefore resembles cultivation rather than accumulation. Literature contributes to this cultivation by transforming perception over time rather than transmitting information instantaneously.

Another important point of convergence concerns language itself. Classical Daoism repeatedly questions the adequacy of language to capture ultimate reality. The opening chapter of the *Dao De Jing* distinguishes the nameless *Dao* from conceptual definitions, suggesting that genuine understanding exceeds linguistic representation (*Dao De Jing*, ch. 1). Mamang Dai's poetry similarly values silence, listening, and sensory attentiveness alongside verbal expression. Landscapes communicate through mist, rainfall, vegetation, birdsong, and seasonal transformation as much as through spoken discourse. Ecological knowledge therefore becomes multisensory rather than exclusively textual.

This observation further strengthens the argument for Daoist Phytopedagogy as a theory of literary learning. Reading is no longer conceived solely as deciphering semantic content. Instead, literary experience cultivates ecological modes of attention analogous to those required for inhabiting forests, observing rivers, or recognising seasonal change. Literature educates not merely by conveying environmental themes but by reorganising perception itself. The reader gradually learns to notice relationships previously obscured by anthropocentric habits of thought.

The comparative dialogue developed here also carries broader implications for environmental humanities. Rather than privileging any single philosophical tradition as universally normative, Daoist Phytopedagogy demonstrates that ecological wisdom frequently emerges through culturally distinct yet conceptually resonant traditions. Daoism contributes sophisticated reflections upon spontaneity, relationality, and non-coercive action. Indigenous ecological cosmologies contribute equally profound understandings of place, ancestry, communal memory, and environmental reciprocity. Their dialogue expands the theoretical resources available for contemporary literary criticism without diminishing the integrity of either tradition.

Ultimately, the comparison between Daoist philosophy and Mamang Dai's ecological imagination reveals that both traditions understand learning as participation within living systems rather than mastery over them. Rivers, forests, mountains, rain, flowers, and trees become collaborators in ethical formation. Human beings remain learners rather than rulers within this ecological community. Daoist Phytopedagogy therefore emerges not as a synthesis that erases cultural difference but as a comparative methodology capable of recognising how geographically distant traditions independently affirm the educational significance of the more-than-human world. At a time when ecological crises increasingly expose the limitations of anthropocentric thought, such comparative approaches offer literary studies a philosophically rigorous and environmentally responsive framework for reimagining both education and coexistence.

1.7 Daoist Phytopedagogy as a New Critical Paradigm in Environmental Humanities

The emergence of environmental humanities during the last three decades has significantly transformed literary criticism by challenging anthropocentric assumptions that have historically governed the interpretation of culture and nature. Ecocriticism, posthumanism, new materialism, critical plant studies, and plant humanities have each contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between literature and the more-than-human world. These approaches have demonstrated that rivers, forests, plants, animals, and ecological systems cannot be reduced to passive settings within literary representation but instead participate in complex networks of material, ethical, and cultural significance. Yet despite these important developments, relatively little attention has been devoted to the pedagogical

capacities of vegetal life itself. Environmental criticism has primarily asked how literature represents nature, whereas the present study proposes a different question: How does literature learn from plants, and how do plants teach readers to inhabit ecological relationships? It is in response to this theoretical gap that Daoist Phytopedagogy is advanced as a new critical paradigm.

Daoist Phytopedagogy differs from traditional ecocriticism in both its philosophical orientation and methodological emphasis. Since the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), ecocriticism has been principally concerned with examining literary representations of environmental crisis, ecological ethics, and human relationships with nature (Glotfelty and Fromm). Later theorists such as Greg Garrard expanded the field by analysing recurring ecological tropes including wilderness, pollution, animals, apocalypse, and sustainability (Garrard). These interventions fundamentally transformed literary studies by demonstrating that ecological questions are inseparable from cultural production. Nevertheless, ecocriticism generally continues to approach nature as the thematic object of literary analysis. Daoist Phytopedagogy shifts the emphasis from representation to pedagogy. Rather than asking how literature depicts forests or rivers, it asks how ecological communities themselves participate in processes of literary learning. Nature is therefore understood not merely as literary content but as an active pedagogical presence.

This shift from representation to education constitutes the first defining characteristic of Daoist Phytopedagogy. Plants, rivers, and forests become epistemic collaborators rather than environmental subjects. Mamang Dai's *River Poems* illustrates this transformation repeatedly, for the poems do not simply describe landscapes but allow those landscapes to reorganise human perception through sustained encounters with vegetal and hydrological life. Literary learning consequently emerges through ecological participation rather than textual mastery.

Daoist Phytopedagogy also differs significantly from contemporary posthumanism. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe have persuasively challenged the exceptional status traditionally accorded to the human subject, emphasising instead distributed agency, multispecies coexistence, and relational ontologies. Their work has profoundly reshaped contemporary environmental thought by exposing the limitations of human-centred philosophical systems. However, posthumanism frequently privileges technological hybridity, cybernetic assemblages, and questions of species boundaries. Daoist Phytopedagogy, while sharing posthumanism's critique of anthropocentrism, directs attention specifically towards vegetal existence and ecological cultivation. The central concern is not simply the decentring of the human but the educational possibilities disclosed by plant life. Trees, flowers, roots, forests, and seasonal growth become teachers whose modes of existence cultivate humility, patience, relationality, and ecological responsibility.

The paradigm likewise extends current developments within plant humanities. Over the past two decades, scholars including Michael Marder, Jeffrey T. Nealon, and Matthew Hall have fundamentally transformed philosophical understandings of vegetal life. Marder has argued that plants challenge deeply entrenched assumptions concerning subjectivity, individuality, and consciousness by revealing distributed forms of existence grounded in relational growth (Marder). Hall has demonstrated that many Indigenous, religious, and philosophical traditions recognise plants as ethical participants within living communities rather than passive biological resources (Hall). Their work has established plants as legitimate philosophical subjects deserving sustained intellectual attention.

Daoist Phytopedagogy builds directly upon these insights while introducing a distinct literary dimension. Whereas plant humanities primarily investigate the ontology, ethics, and philosophy of vegetal life, Daoist Phytopedagogy examines how literary texts transform readers through encounters with vegetal existence. The emphasis therefore shifts from plants as philosophical subjects to plants as pedagogical agents. Literature becomes the medium through which vegetal knowledge is experienced, internalised, and ethically enacted.

The originality of Daoist Phytopedagogy further resides in its integration of classical Daoist philosophy with Indigenous ecological thought. Environmental humanities has increasingly acknowledged the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems for understanding sustainability, biodiversity, and ecological ethics. Yet comparative studies often remain confined within regional or disciplinary boundaries. Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes that Daoist

philosophy and Indigenous ecological cosmologies may enter into productive dialogue precisely because both traditions understand existence as fundamentally relational rather than hierarchical. The Dao, wu wei, and ziran illuminate the pedagogical dynamics of Mamang Dai's poetry without reducing Indigenous knowledge to Daoist metaphysics. Comparison therefore functions hermeneutically rather than genealogically, preserving cultural specificity while revealing conceptual resonance.

This comparative orientation also distinguishes Daoist Phytopedagogy from universalising ecological theories. Rather than seeking a single philosophical explanation for environmental ethics, the framework demonstrates that geographically distant intellectual traditions may independently develop comparable ecological insights. Such convergence reflects not historical dependence but shared attentiveness to the educational capacities of the living world. Comparative philosophy thus becomes a method for expanding ecological understanding while respecting epistemological diversity.

Methodologically, Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes four interrelated principles for literary criticism.

First, it adopts a relational ontology. Literary texts are understood as ecological networks in which human and more-than-human agencies continually interact. Rivers, forests, trees, mountains, rainfall, and plants do not merely surround human characters but actively participate in the production of meaning.

Second, it advances a vegetal epistemology. Knowledge is not restricted to human rationality but emerges through attentive engagement with vegetal processes including rootedness, growth, regeneration, adaptation, seasonal transformation, and ecological reciprocity. Reading therefore resembles cultivation rather than extraction.

Third, Daoist Phytopedagogy develops an ecological pedagogy grounded in the Daoist principles of wu wei and ziran. Education is conceived not as the transmission of information but as the gradual cultivation of dispositions. Just as forests mature through seasonal rhythms rather than mechanical acceleration, literary learning unfolds through patience, attentiveness, and sustained ecological participation.

Finally, Daoist Phytopedagogy embraces comparative ecological hermeneutics. Rather than imposing one philosophical system upon another, it establishes conversations among diverse ecological traditions that illuminate common ethical concerns while preserving historical and cultural specificity. Such comparative reading resists both relativism and reductionism by recognising multiple pathways towards ecological wisdom.

These methodological principles collectively reposition literary criticism within the broader project of environmental humanities. Instead of approaching literature exclusively as a repository of environmental themes, Daoist Phytopedagogy understands literary texts as living pedagogical ecosystems capable of cultivating ecological consciousness. Reading becomes an ethical practice through which readers gradually learn to inhabit relationships of reciprocity with the more-than-human world. Literary criticism consequently acquires a transformative rather than merely interpretive function.

The significance of this paradigm extends beyond Mamang Dai's River Poems. Daoist Phytopedagogy possesses considerable comparative potential across global literary traditions. It may illuminate the ecological imagination of Indigenous poets from Northeast India, environmental writings in East Asian literatures, Romantic poetry, contemporary eco-poetics, and traditions of sacred landscape extending across Asia. Because the framework foregrounds learning rather than representation, it also offers new possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue with environmental education, ecological philosophy, ethnobotany, landscape studies, and sustainability studies.

Equally important, Daoist Phytopedagogy responds directly to contemporary environmental crises by reconsidering the cultural purposes of literary education itself. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and ecological displacement cannot be addressed solely through technological innovation or scientific knowledge. They also require transformed habits of perception and ethical imagination. Literature contributes uniquely to this transformation because it cultivates attentiveness before prescribing action. By learning with rivers, trees, forests, flowers, and rainfall, readers develop ecological dispositions that extend beyond intellectual comprehension towards forms of lived environmental responsibility.

Ultimately, Daoist Phytopedagogy proposes that the future of environmental humanities depends not merely upon expanding the objects of literary criticism but upon reimagining the very process of literary learning. Plants are no longer passive motifs awaiting symbolic interpretation; they become pedagogical companions whose silent yet persistent modes of existence disclose alternative possibilities for knowledge, ethics, and coexistence. Situated at the intersection of Daoist philosophy, Indigenous ecological thought, plant humanities, and literary studies, Daoist Phytopedagogy offers a new critical paradigm through which literature may be understood as an ecology of learning—a space where the vegetal world educates human consciousness towards relational humility, environmental reciprocity, and planetary care.

2. Conclusion

This article has proposed Daoist Phytopedagogy as a new theoretical framework for literary studies by bringing classical Daoist philosophy into a sustained comparative dialogue with the Indigenous ecological imagination articulated in Mamang Dai's *River Poems*. Rather than interpreting plants merely as metaphoric embellishments or symbolic extensions of human consciousness, Daoist Phytopedagogy has argued that vegetal life constitutes an epistemic community capable of reshaping literary learning through relational modes of ecological awareness. In doing so, the study has demonstrated that literature can function not simply as a representation of environmental ethics but as an active pedagogical practice through which readers cultivate new forms of ecological perception, ethical responsibility, and more-than-human coexistence.

The philosophical dialogue established between Daoism and the Indigenous cosmology of Arunachal Pradesh has not sought to identify historical influence or cultural transmission. Instead, the comparison has revealed striking convergences between two distinct intellectual traditions that independently resist anthropocentric assumptions. Daoist concepts such as the *Dao*, *wu wei*, and *ziran* illuminate the ecological dynamics of Mamang Dai's poetry without subsuming the *Adi* worldview within Chinese philosophical categories. Likewise, Dai's poetic landscapes expand the comparative possibilities of Daoist ecological thought by demonstrating how rivers, forests, trees, mountains, rainfall, and ancestral landscapes become living participants in cultural memory and ethical formation. The comparative method employed throughout this study therefore remains dialogical rather than assimilative, preserving the conceptual autonomy of both traditions while revealing their shared commitment to relational ontology.

Close readings of *River Poems* have further demonstrated that vegetal existence in Dai's poetry exceeds conventional symbolic interpretation. Trees do not merely signify endurance; they embody temporal continuity through rootedness and regeneration. Forests function not simply as settings but as ecological communities in which cultural memory is preserved and renewed. Rivers become archives of collective history, while rain initiates cycles of restoration that reconnect human experience with seasonal transformation. Such recurring ecological motifs collectively establish what this article has identified as a pedagogy of the living landscape, where learning emerges through sustained encounters with vegetal and fluvial life rather than through exclusively human instruction. Literary education is consequently reimagined as a reciprocal relationship between readers and the more-than-human world.

The article has also argued that Daoist Phytopedagogy contributes to contemporary debates within environmental humanities by extending current discussions of plant studies beyond questions of representation toward questions of pedagogy. Existing scholarship in plant humanities has significantly advanced the recognition of vegetal agency within philosophy, ecology, and cultural studies. Nevertheless, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the pedagogical implications of vegetal life within literary criticism. Daoist Phytopedagogy addresses this gap by proposing that plants constitute not merely subjects of literary discourse but active conditions for ecological learning. Reading itself becomes a process of cultivation analogous to vegetal growth: gradual, relational, seasonal, and responsive rather than linear, accumulative, or anthropocentric.

This theoretical intervention also contributes to comparative literary studies by demonstrating that environmental ethics need not depend upon universal philosophical systems. Instead, ecological wisdom frequently emerges through culturally distinct traditions that nevertheless converge in recognising the intrinsic value of more-than-human life. Daoist philosophy and the

Indigenous ecological imagination represented in River Poems each articulate sophisticated visions of coexistence grounded in reciprocity, humility, and environmental responsibility. Their dialogue therefore enriches contemporary literary criticism while avoiding reductive models of cultural equivalence.

At a broader methodological level, Daoist Phytopedagogy invites scholars to reconsider the relationship between literary criticism and ecological practice. If literature possesses the capacity to reorganise perception, then literary education itself assumes renewed significance within an age increasingly characterised by biodiversity loss, climate change, ecological displacement, and environmental injustice. Ecological literacy cannot be reduced to scientific information alone; it also requires imaginative, ethical, and affective transformations that literature uniquely facilitates. Mamang Dai's poetry demonstrates that readers learn not only by interpreting landscapes but by inhabiting their rhythms, listening to their silences, and recognising the relational intelligence embedded within forests, rivers, plants, and seasonal cycles.

The present study necessarily remains exploratory. Daoist Phytopedagogy has been developed here through the close examination of a single poetic collection and through dialogue with selected foundational concepts of classical Daoism. Future research may extend this framework by examining its applicability to other Indigenous literatures of South Asia, East Asian eco-poetics, Buddhist environmental thought, or contemporary plant humanities. Comparative studies involving poets such as Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, or even ecological readings of Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das may further refine and expand the theoretical possibilities proposed here. Similarly, interdisciplinary engagements with environmental philosophy, ethnobotany, ecological anthropology, and Indigenous education may contribute additional dimensions to Daoist Phytopedagogy as an evolving field of inquiry. Ultimately, this article contends that literature teaches most profoundly when it enables readers to relinquish the illusion of human exceptionalism and to recognise themselves as participants within living ecological communities. Trees, rivers, forests, rainfall, and mountains are not passive objects awaiting interpretation but co-creators of ethical understanding whose presence continually reshapes human imagination. Through the comparative dialogue between Daoist philosophy and Mamang Dai's River Poems, Daoist Phytopedagogy offers a new conceptual vocabulary for understanding how literature cultivates ecological consciousness by allowing the vegetal world itself to become a teacher. In an era marked by accelerating environmental crises, such a reorientation of literary learning may prove not merely intellectually productive but ethically indispensable.

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