



<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.07>

Research article

## Ecological Aesthetics and the Ecological Vector of Modernization in the Far East and the Western World

Marina Vasilyeva  

Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, Polytechnicheskaya, 29, 195251, St. Petersburg, Russia

[vasilieva\\_ma@spbstu.ru](mailto:vasilieva_ma@spbstu.ru)

### Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the formation of ecological consciousness in Western and Far Eastern cultures (China, Japan, Korea) through the prism of ecological aesthetics. The author examines aesthetics not as a realm of pure contemplation, but as a discursive bridge mediating the transition from abstract philosophical concepts to concrete social and everyday practices of interacting with nature. Methodologically, the research draws on Clifford Geertz's approach to the analysis of cultural schemas, which allows for the identification of cognitive structures linking the ideal and the everyday, as well as on the study of cultural infrastructure (institutions, technologies, legal norms) that shapes the field of ecological action. The work demonstrates that the Western tradition, grounded in a subject-object paradigm and individual responsibility, historically generates powerful grassroots environmental movements. However, in shaping ecological consciousness, it faces challenges of excessive alarmism, manipulation, and populism. The Eastern tradition, rooted in philosophies of harmony (Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism), implicitly presupposes a centralized, state-led model of regulation. In practice, this results in the high efficiency of top-down environmental initiatives, while archaic patterns of everyday consumption persist. Particular attention is paid to the cultural dissonance in contemporary China, where accelerated modernization along Western lines comes into conflict with both traditional ideals and current Western green standards. The author concludes that ecological aesthetics today is becoming the very field where the tension between the global environmental imperative and local cultural specificity is resolved, fostering new, hybrid forms of ecological consciousness.

**Keywords:** Ecological aesthetics; Ecological consciousness in China; Ecological consciousness in the East; Ecological consciousness in the West; Everyday environmental practices; Modernization and ecology

**Citation:** Vasilyeva M. (2026). Ecological Aesthetics and the Ecological Vector of Modernization in the Far East and the Western World. *Technology and Language*, 7(1), 103-120. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.07>



© Vasilyeva, M. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



УДК 1:008

<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.07>

Научная статья

## Экологическая эстетика и экологический вектор модернизации стран Дальнего Востока и Западного мира

Марина Васильева  

Санкт-Петербургский политехнический университет имени Петра Великого, Политехническая, 29, 195251, Санкт-Петербург, Россия

### Аннотация

В статье предпринимается компаративный анализ формирования экологического сознания в культурах Запада и Востока (Китай, Япония, Корея) сквозь призму экологической эстетики. Автор рассматривает эстетику не как область чистого созерцания, а как дискурсивный мост, опосредующий переход от абстрактных философских концепций к конкретным социальным и бытовым практикам взаимодействия с природой. Методологически исследование опирается на подход К. Гирца к анализу культурных схем, позволяющий выявить когнитивные структуры, связывающие идеальное и повседневное, а также на изучение культурной инфраструктуры (институтов, технологий, правовых норм), формирующей поле экологических действий. В работе показано, что западная традиция, основанная на субъект-объектной парадигме и индивидуальной ответственности, исторически порождает мощные низовые экологические движения, но при формировании экологического сознания сталкивается с излишним алармизмом, манипуляцией и популизмом. Восточная же традиция, укорененная в философии гармонии (даосизм, конфуцианство, буддизм), имплицитно предполагает централизованную, государственную модель регулирования, что на практике оборачивается высокой эффективностью вертикальных экологических инициатив при сохранении архаичных паттернов повседневного потребления. Особое внимание уделяется культурному диссонансу современного Китая, где форсированная модернизация по западному образцу вступает в противоречие как с традиционными идеалами, так и с актуальными западными зелёными стандартами. Автор приходит к выводу, что именно экологическая эстетика сегодня становится тем полем, где разрешается напряжение между глобальным экологическим императивом и локальной культурной спецификой, формируя новые, гибридные формы экологического сознания.

**Ключевые слова:** Экологическая эстетика; Экологическое сознание в Китае; Экологическое сознание на Востоке; Экологическое сознание на Западе; Экологические практики повседневности; Модернизация и экология

**Для цитирования:** Vasilyeva M. (2026). Ecological Aesthetics and the Ecological Vector of Modernization in the Far East and the Western World // *Technology and Language*. № 7(1). P. 103-120. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2026.01.07>



© Васильева, М. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



## INTRODUCTION

This article presents ecology as one of the most crucial factors of modernization for Eastern and Western cultures. Attitudes towards environmental problems in different parts of the world are shaped under the influence of diverse philosophical traditions, historical developmental paths, socio-economic conditions, and political systems. The field of ecological aesthetics, which has only recently emerged as a distinct area of study, plays a significant role here. It can not only reveal the current attitudes of people towards their environment but also analyze how abstract categories translate into real-world practices of human-nature interaction. The study of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon cannot be simple and entails certain methodological limitations and challenges. At the same time, identifying these limitations and reflecting on how to overcome the difficulties proves to be as valuable as studying the subject of research itself.

Thus, the aim of the study is to analyze the process of forming ecological consciousness in Eastern and Western cultures, as well as to examine ecological aesthetics as a discourse within which theories are transformed into environmental practices. The relevance of the research is ensured by the significance of the ecological trend. Awareness of global risks and efforts to change practices of interaction with nature are not a concession to alarmism and fashion, but a responsible step that all communities on the planet must take, regardless of their cultural particularities.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Given that the research objective involves analyzing the practices of different cultures, the comparative method can be identified as the primary one. However, when comparing broad cultural phenomena that are inherently heterogeneous and not easily subjected to comparison, this method needs to be supplemented with analytical approaches.

To analyze and compare the process of forming ecological consciousness, it is necessary to identify the cultural mechanisms that enable philosophical and cultural categories to be realized in practices. It is evident that these mechanisms themselves may differ across cultures, making it difficult to pinpoint a specific methodological tool. Nevertheless, several theories can provide assistance. At the theoretical level, this includes the analysis of cultural schemas, as presented in the works of Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973). This approach allows for the search of cognitive structures that mediate the connection between abstract ideas and concrete actions. At the level of practices, it involves the study of cultural infrastructure, i.e., the material systems (technologies, urban environment), institutions, and legal norms that shape and constrain both ideas and practices. There is currently a sufficient amount of high-quality statistical research on environmental topics that can provide insight into the current state of affairs in various regions of the world. Such materials will be used in this study, along with direct observations.



For contemporary culture, the category of environmental friendliness is already demonstrably significant, yet its analysis presents numerous difficulties. Some of these arise from the specific nature of the object, others from the specific nature of discursive practices. The study of sociocultural phenomena inevitably encounters a fundamental methodological difficulty stemming from the dual nature of the object of study. On one hand, cultural phenomena exist as parts of a larger system of meanings, as concepts. We can speak of abstract constructs expressed in philosophical theories, ideologies, religious teachings, and general cultural narratives. On the other hand, phenomena manifest themselves as visible everyday practices, woven into the fabric of social interaction, and as non-reflexive habits. This generates a constant tension between two methodological poles: the analysis of the ideal and the analysis of the empirical.

The main problem is that often there may be no direct correspondence between these levels. Concepts do not mechanically descend into everyday life, nor does everyday life automatically rise to the level of reflection. Between them lies a field of interpretation, resistance, adaptation, and creative reinterpretation. Given all these complexities, a deliberate attempt to compare what theory and practice bring to culture seems entirely justified – to assess why theory cannot be fully realized, or why everyday social practices do not receive adequate reflection at the level of conceptualizing ideas and phenomena. Often, it is precisely the analysis of these contradictions within a cultural system at different levels that allows for a full appreciation of its specificity.

Such an approach appears most productive when investigating the phenomenon of ecology as a current vector for the modernization of production and life. Ecology has become one of the most important and most evident trends of globalization, moving beyond purely rational, thrifty attitudes towards nature to become a primary vector of modernization. This creates a still relatively new paradigm where green technologies, the circular economy, and carbon neutrality determine the competitiveness of states and corporations. Sustainability is understood not merely as a trend, but as a prerequisite for survival and growth in the 21st century.

## **ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AS A FACTOR IN THE FORMATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Considerable attention is paid to the theme of ecology in both scientific and public discourse. It has philosophical and theoretical foundations that are quite consciously acknowledged and openly articulated. At the same time, a peculiarity of the concept itself lies in its call for changing practices: practices of individual consumption and social interaction, the organization of production, and state regulation of processes at various levels. Because of this, the gap between conceptualization and social practice becomes extremely visible and significant. Furthermore, despite the manifestation of a global interest in this topic, very serious differences are observed in the perception of ecological ideas between Western and Eastern cultures. Therefore, we can speak of an ecological consciousness currently being formed everywhere, bearing the imprints of multiple factors. This is a global process, the multiple outcomes of which are determined by local specificities.



Ecological consciousness is the core of ecological culture, which rests upon general attitudes in human-nature relations and actual practice. The formation of ecological consciousness, in one way or another, largely reflects the power and economic structures present in society. “Economic” in this context can be understood broadly: not only groups and institutions that have the resource to disseminate a certain position but also the administrative resource to introduce specific criteria for activity.

To understand the current environmental trend and the process of forming ecological consciousness, it is worthwhile to carefully study the domain of ecological and environmental aesthetics. Ecological aesthetics is not merely about the beauty of landscapes; it concerns a fundamental rethinking of our relationship with the natural world, manifested in perception and creative activity. Its analysis is critically important because it engages with the deep-seated motives of human behavior. In the last decade, it has been increasingly discussed as an independent field of research with its own theoretical and conceptual integrity.

The philosophical analysis of the aesthetic values of nature traces its roots to the eighteenth century, when treatises on the essence of natural beauty and the specificity of the aesthetic attitude toward nature were produced within both English and German aesthetics, with primary attention devoted to three aesthetic categories: the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. In the following century, this tradition was taken up by the Romantics. In Russia, a profound philosophical treatise on the beauty of nature was written in the nineteenth century by Vladimir Solovyov. Nevertheless, the concept of environmental aesthetics – focused not solely on beauty but encompassing a broader range of aesthetic issues – emerged only in the second half of the twentieth century (Prozersky, 2013a; 2013b).

Many environmentalists consider the impetus for the aesthetic study of nature to be the 1966 publication of Ronald Hepburn's article “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” (Hepburn, 1966). In this work, Hepburn criticized classical aesthetics for the narrowness of its scope, which encompassed only the problems of art, and insisted that serious aesthetic experience is acquired not only through engagement with art but also through interaction with nature. Yet the question concerning the essence of aesthetic relations with nature remained open. Subsequently, in attempts to address this question, two principal approaches within environmental aesthetics emerged, each possessing distinct methodological foundations: the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist.

Proponents of the cognitivist position include Alan Carlson (1999), Patricia Matthews (2002), Glenn Parsons (2002), and Holmes Rolston (1988). As their credo, they have adopted the call of the Japanese environmental researcher Yuriko Saito to “speak with nature on its own terms” and to “proceed from nature itself” (Saito, 1985, p. 340). Adopting such a position implies that understanding the aesthetic qualities of nature is possible only with specific knowledge about it. This means that the development of the natural sciences and the incorporation of their findings are necessary for a qualitatively rich aesthetic experience. Under the non-cognitivist approach, attention shifts to the emotional component of aesthetic experience. The foundation of non-cognitivist



aesthetics is the aesthetics of engagement, whose principal proponent is Arnold Berleant (1992; 1997; 2010). Non-cognitivists emphasize that the aesthetic perception of the environment is conducted by the recipient from within the environment itself. Any organism, including the social one, exists in a direct continuum with its environment. We cannot distance our bodies from the environment, as it envelops us, directly adjoins us, and sensorily affects all our sense organs. From this interpretation of experience as an unbreakable linkage between human being and environment, a significant conclusion for aesthetics follows: namely, that the classical aesthetics of contemplation must yield to an aesthetics of human engagement in the processes occurring within the environment (Berleant, 1992, p. 67). The artistic object is demarcated from its surrounding non-artistic environment by a frame. Yet in nature, there is neither a frame that sets apart an aesthetic artifact from the environment, nor the artifact itself.

The cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions are united not only by their shared interest in nature but also by their opposition to placing art at the center of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. This idea is articulated with particular clarity in the books and articles of the Japanese-born, English-language scholar Yuriko Saito (Saito, 2007; 2017). Her work synthesizes Western and Eastern cultures, the latter of which does not maintain such a division between so-called “high” arts and “applied” arts. Saito argues against the art-centered perspective in aesthetics. Manifestations of the aesthetic in nature and everyday life, the author insists, are quite different from those in art, primarily because our mode of engagement with objects differs from our mode of engagement with artworks. In life (unlike in a museum), we not only look at things but also actively use them, continuously introducing changes into them. Therefore, to uphold a principle that values only those things reminiscent of art is to greatly impoverish life. In accordance with Japanese tradition, Saito maintains that all moments of life should be imbued with aesthetic experience. For this reason, alongside traditional categories (the beautiful, the sublime, the tragic, the comic), aesthetics incorporates such concepts as “shock,” “drive,” “suspense,” “non-standardness,” “neatness,” “cuteness,” “attractiveness,” and other notions that extend beyond the field traditionally considered the domain of the aesthetic. The focus is on everyday moments of life, on the environment surrounding the individual, and it frequently centers specifically on nature.

Today, the problem of the aesthetic attitude toward nature possesses an interdisciplinary character; it draws into its purview data from numerous disciplines, both the humanities and the natural sciences, and has direct implications for addressing both general philosophical and practical, social problems. One can argue that contemporary postclassical epistemology and rationality, more broadly, exhibit ecological characteristics. Both at the level of constructing scientific theories and at the level of everyday interaction with the surrounding world (nature and technology), rigid subject-object boundaries are being reconsidered and are giving way to the construction of a more egalitarian model of participation. Ecological ideas manifest themselves even in domains not directly connected with nature. Within aesthetics, this is reflected in the dissolution of the classical subject-object tension and a shifting of focus toward the unitary environment within which they coexist. Consequently, environmental aesthetics (in the sense of ecologically oriented aesthetics) develops alongside environmental aesthetics (in



the sense of aesthetics of environment) and the aesthetics of atmosphere, drawing upon the same shared theoretical positions. Specifically, ecological aesthetics was at its peak of popularity three decades ago; the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, held in Finland in 1995, was devoted precisely to this theme. Today, it constitutes a complex interdisciplinary field of inquiry that reflects the search for new horizons for contemporary knowledge.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to assert that these inquiries proceed smoothly and without difficulties. Although the aforementioned works made a significant claim for the establishment of a new branch of aesthetic science, identifying its initial philosophical-theoretical and scientific-practical meanings, subsequent philosophical elaboration on the problems of the aesthetics of nature has slowed in many countries. The principal advances have been made in the areas of empirical landscape studies (methodologies for assessing the aesthetic qualities of landscapes), architectural environments, and environmental design. Still, there are several important achievements of ecological aesthetics to date.

First and foremost, aesthetics shapes value. Regardless of any theoretical understanding of nature, its protection in practice will remain a low-priority task unless it transforms into a value and gains justification as a cultural goal. Ecological aesthetics in Western culture teaches one to see intrinsic value and fragile harmony in natural processes, whether in the patterns on tree bark or the complexity of a wetland ecosystem. This transforms consciousness, shifting nature from the category of “object” to that of “subject,” worthy of respect and protection. For Eastern culture, the emphasis on the consequences of actions and their significance for nature is more important.

Secondly, ecological aesthetics offers a new language and new images. Alarmist messages about catastrophes from eco-activists in the West often provoke rejection and feelings of powerlessness. Aesthetics, however, can inspire by offering positive images of a desirable future: green cities, the symbiosis of technology and living nature, the elegance of a circular economy. It makes environmentally friendly choices not only ethical but also attractive, stylish, and meaningful. Thus, without a change in aesthetic perception, any technological solutions and political directives will have limited effect. For people to sincerely strive to protect nature, they must first learn to feel it, to see its authentic beauty, and to feel the need for that beauty in their daily lives. Ecological aesthetics, along with the aesthetics of everyday life, serves as a bridge from the rational understanding of problems to emotional involvement in their solution, a transition to practice from abstract theories. Now there are research demonstrating the significance of this field for changing everyday practices, using Russian material as an example (Rybakov, 2022).

Eco-art developed as a part of the search for a new language. This movement has been taking shape since the 1960s, within which artists drew public attention to rethinking relationships with the environment. The first exhibition, “Ecological Art”, was held in 1969 in New York. Today, eco-art encompasses environment (the interpretation of ecological issues through art), earthworks, land art (the creation of works connected with the natural landscape), sustainable art, landscape painting, and photography. Interestingly, many projects were created or exhibited in the United States. And today, this remains the center of eco-art, although by actual indicators, it is far from being the



most environmentally friendly country. This is an interesting detail, once again demonstrating that theoretical and artistic reflection and the practice of an ecological attitude toward nature do not always go hand in hand. In any case, ecological art accompanies the current ecological trend on a global level.

The first known works in this genre were distinguished by their large scale, utilizing landscapes as the basis for the artwork. In 1970, the famous “Spiral Jetty” by Robert Smithson was created – a massive structure of stones on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in the United States (Fig. 1). This scale is also reflected in the work of Agnes Denes from 1982, titled “Wheatfield – A Confrontation” (Fig. 2). The artist planted a wheat field in the center of New York on a landfill site. In 1982, the artist Joseph Beuys proposed conducting one of the first environmental actions to provoke the planting of “7,000 Oaks” across Europe.



**Figure 1.** Spiral Jetty from Rozel Point



**Figure 2.** Wheatfield – A Confrontation by Agnes Denes

The contemporary language of eco-art is characterized by a more pronounced rejection of the narrative of domination and a transition to a language of participation, and ethical responsibility. While classical art typically aimed to create a static artifact, eco-art emphasizes temporality, regeneration, and the viewer's immersion in ecological processes. A compelling contemporary example of this perspective is the 2026 installation “Castaway: The Afterlife of Plastic” by the collective TRES (2025-2026) (Fig. 3), which utilized various kinds of debris from Australian beaches. The artists sought to demonstrate the result of the interaction between the modern human world (plastic) and the natural landscape.



**Figure 3.** And yet it moves by TRES (2025-2026)



This expands the boundaries of aesthetic experience, integrating into it not only the visual qualities of the landscape but also invisible anthropogenic impacts, chemical processes, and interspecies interactions. This shift in focus contributes to the formation of a holistic worldview, in which nature ceases to be a passive object of representation and is endowed with the status of an active co-subject of dialogue making eco-art a complex semiotic project. Its goal is to overcome the reductionism of technogenic civilization by creating images capable of encompassing the complexity of ecological systems. The emerging visual language becomes a mechanism for forming a new ecological sensibility, necessary for survival and sustainable development in the era of global climate change.

In their pursuit of new images and their theoretical justification, Western authors frequently turn to researchers from the countries of the Far East. From the Western perspective, the East has always appeared as a place of greater integrity, of healthy human-nature relations in which subject-object boundaries are not accentuated. Eastern philosophy, including Chinese and Indian traditions, has traditionally attracted interest for its engagement with concepts implying greater human respect for the harmony and law of the external world. Therefore, the category of ecological aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and the aesthetics of atmosphere and everyday life in the West is often realized with mentions of or direct references to Eastern authors and traditional practices. Western researchers, like tourists, expect new, more effective environmental solutions from the East, based *simply* on a different vision of the problem. However, upon arriving in the East – in China, India – they encounter unfamiliar practices of consumption, attitudes towards nature and objects, and waste management, which not only seem unmodern, outdated, and unreasonable but also contradict what Western people know about Eastern traditions of thought.

The philosophical and cultural roots of ecological conceptions in the cultures of the Far East are usually associated with the idea of harmony. Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism emphasize the close interconnection between humans and nature, which is dangerous to disrupt and should be maintained by relying on knowledge of and adherence to natural laws. Nature is understood not as a resource but as an integrated system of which humans are a part. In the Chinese tradition, it is humans who bear responsibility for order or disorder in the Celestial Empire. The degree of this responsibility depends on one's status and position in society; consequently, the ruler plays a crucial role in maintaining order. As long as the ruler is benevolent and follows ritual, harmony and order prevail in the Celestial Empire. But as soon as the ruler deviates from his path (Dao), Heaven immediately displays its ominous signs, the Celestial Empire falls into chaos, and the people, the “voice of Heaven,” may depose him (Liu, 2024; Tsybanov, 2022).

Confucius says relatively little about the relationship between humans and nature. His teachings are primarily directed at social problems, at understanding the human position in society, rather than in the world. However, upon closer acquaintance with the Chinese philosophical tradition, it becomes clear that for Confucius, interest in social problems by no means excludes interest in the problems of the world and nature. As Leonard Perelomov notes, in Confucius's Analects, “four fundamental principles of the relationship between society and nature can be identified:



1. To become a worthy member of society, a person must constantly deepen their knowledge of nature, knowing not only the habits of animals and birds but also the laws governing the growth of trees and grasses.
2. Humans, and consequently society, can gain vital energy and repose only in nature.
3. It is necessary to treat both the animal world and natural resources with care.
4. Solemn prayers and sacrifices should be regularly performed in honor of the spirits of Heaven and Earth, and importantly – at the highest state level” (Perelomov, 2004, p. 24).

This can be regarded as a philosophical foundation for various issues concerning the understanding of nature and the ethics of relating to it; however, it provides no specifics regarding the organization of actions. For many centuries, Chinese culture, in its everyday and artistic practices, may well have conformed to these high ideals. But the result of the ideological shifts of the “first enlightenment” (late 19th-early 20th centuries) and the “second enlightenment” (late 20th-early 21st centuries) has been a clear change in the relationship with nature. High rates of industrial development, a sharp increase in population density, and the growing demands of the economy – these factors determine the specificity of everyday practices and also lead to real environmental problems in China's major cities. Consequently, the question of the relationship with nature becomes not only traditionally significant and speculative but also an urgent issue affecting the quality of life for millions of people. Reflections on this issue reference traditional philosophy, but practices have changed due to massive waves of modernization, largely looking to the West as a model, thus creating a series of contradictions. Modern European philosophy, which in one way or another underpins the scientific and technological progress of the last four centuries, formulates a subject-object relationship between humans and the surrounding world. This, obviously, aligns poorly with the ideas of classical Chinese culture. However, the forced pace of modernization in China required more the copying and acceleration of resource-consumption practices than their reflection and adaptation. The result is impressive economic and technological development against a backdrop of a double contradiction: current practices correspond neither to traditional ideas of harmony and respect for nature, nor to current Western environmental trends. An internal cultural conflict emerges – a feeling of disproportion between ongoing economic processes, pragmatic policies, and traditional cultural values expressed in Chinese philosophy and concepts like “Dao.”

### **COMPARISON OF THE ECOLOGICAL VECTOR OF MODERNIZATION IN THE WEST AND EAST**

The European Union is a global leader in the legislative regulation and implementation of the circular economy and environmental practices. Its leadership is largely ensured by the fact that, as pioneers, they set the criteria for assessing the environmental sustainability of an economy. The practice of separate waste collection is implemented almost everywhere in Europe, although the level of effectiveness varies between different regions. At the same time, a standard for this practice is set for the



future in all countries according to the EU Waste Directive 2018/851, which aims for 60% of municipal waste to be prepared for reuse and recycling by 2030, and 65% by 2035 (European Commission, 2018). Attention to waste is not limited to this. Systems are in place where producers of goods and packaging are financially and organizationally responsible for their disposal, e.g., the “Green Dot” in Germany (Van Eygen et al., 2020). There are highly efficient deposit systems for plastic bottles and aluminum cans (e.g., in Norway, Sweden, Germany, Lithuania) with return rates of 90-95% (Lavee & Nardiya, 2023). Digitalization systems are being actively developed, funding is provided for smart containers with fill-level sensors, and mobile apps are used for information and citizen incentives (Marques et al., 2022). The EU has bans on certain single-use items, promotes the development of biodegradable alternatives, and funds research aimed at creating materials and packaging that are easier and more efficient to recycle (Eurostat, 2024) (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** OpenHill is one of the world's most environmentally friendly waste and energy recycling facilities. Copenhagen, Denmark.

But the Western world is not only Europe. In the USA, the share of waste sent for recycling and composting is relatively low: 32%, although 77% of Americans claim to



practice separate collection. People are more aware of green projects and initiatives than of their concrete results. Current research finds a clear discrepancy between the espoused green values, ideals, and practices in the USA (Jessen, 2025). Today US society is divided into several factions whose views on the environmental situation differ greatly.

In the East, unity is also not observed; countries demonstrate different levels of development on environmental issues. In China, a separate waste collection system was launched by the government in Shanghai in 2019 and quickly spread to all major cities (Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, etc.). The system is built on strict rules, fines for non-compliance, and the social credit system may take environmental behavior into account. Residential complexes have attendants monitoring sorting (Zhang et al., 2022). This quickly yielded positive results: according to China's Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the recycling rate of household waste in key cities exceeded 35% and continues to grow rapidly. China is building a huge number of modern waste treatment and waste-to-energy plants. The key driver is administrative resources and alignment with the national “Zero Waste Cities” campaign. In 2018, a ban on importing foreign waste came into effect, and in 2020, the Law on the Prevention of Environmental Pollution by Solid Waste was passed (Brooks et al., 2018; Wen et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). Research is currently underway on integrating AI into sorting and recycling processes. However, tourists barely notice this system, unlike in neighboring countries.

In Japan and South Korea, highly developed and efficient separate waste collection systems have long existed, which impress visitors, especially the complex systems in Japan with dozens of fractions (Park & Lah, 2020; Matsuda & Hirai, 2021). Research in these countries focuses on high recycling technologies (e.g., chemical recycling of plastics), sorting robotics, and energy efficiency. Everyday eco-practices are very successful here, but transferring their experience to other countries is extremely problematic due to cultural specificities. In many ways, these countries are similar to China, but China has become extremely noticeable and significant due to the scale of both its environmental mistakes and its successes, given the size of its production and population.

In Chinese stores, tourists are surprised by the abundance of single-use packaging, often non-recyclable and quite bulky. Global confectionery brands have faced the need to adapt their packaging. Due to hygienic considerations and the fact that sweets in China are always associated with giving and sharing, the packaging must be either very presentable or individual for each candy. This contradicts the values of Western manufacturers.

Besides the topic of recycling, there are other environmental initiatives. China often turns out to be the leader in these, for example, in the production and installation of solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicles, and batteries. Currently, China is implementing the construction of “eco-cities,” large-scale greening projects, and rooftop parks. These practices are accompanied and inspired by research in the field of environmental aesthetics (Dzikevich & Tang, 2025). Key ideas in this area, realized in China, include the aesthetic concepts of the “Garden City” and “Beautiful China” as models for integrating national views and contemporary trends in ecological aesthetics (Li, 2020).



Both in the East and the West, artists actively reflect on environmental problems and trends, but in different ways. At the latest Shanghai Biennale, the theme of non-human subjectivity and agency became central.

Today, in many countries, eco-practices have become a strategic priority, a conscious vector for the modernization of life, but one can move in this given direction by different paths. If Europe followed the path of gradual education and the creation of a complex legal framework, China demonstrates “shock therapy” – the ability to rapidly change reality on a gigantic scale through administrative methods. State involvement is also important in the West, but it appears more as a reaction to public demand, sometimes formal and populist. In China, conversely, large-scale state projects prove to be far more effective than the everyday practices of citizens. Both approaches today yield high results and serve as examples for other regions of the world.

To the above should be added an analysis of the philosophical positions and cultural characteristics of the two regions. Western culture, drawing strength from Western European philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, long perceived humans and nature as two distinct entities and often interpreted reason as a God-given right for humans to have dominion over nature. The Enlightenment reinforced the idea of reason as a tool for conquering the environment. The priority of individual freedom and the rights of the individual also manifested in the culture of mass consumption as an individual right to comfort and goods. At the same time, the idea of personal responsibility in Christian and atheistic philosophical concepts endows each person with responsibility for the consequences of every choice and action. This generates powerful grassroots environmental movements and resistance to external constraints, as well as a strong sense of guilt, which becomes a tool of manipulation in various political and social debates.

In the East, in countries with Confucian and Buddhist cultures, there is more talk of harmony and the unity of humans and nature. Here, responsibility before Heaven for order in the Celestial Empire is distributed according to the social hierarchy. Therefore, it is entirely logical that the state approach often dominates in decision-making, and social movements may have less influence. It is the state that should be interested in maintaining the overall natural order. The necessity and speed of economic growth lead in this situation to interesting adaptation schemes: for example, the construction of dams and new, large-scale technological solutions, rather than a focus on changing consumer models.

The Western approach to environmental issues today is characterized by alarmism and calls for action aimed at quick results. This is largely due to the political dimension of the issue, the struggle for voters, and societal pressure. Practical activity has its effect, but many initiatives turn out to be more like symbolic actions (e.g., Earth Hour and switching off lights). However, ecological consciousness itself has formed slowly in the West, demonstrating a gradual evolution of ideas about the human-nature relationship. In the East, a more abrupt transition is taking place in the realm of practices, and they are on a larger scale. At the same time, there is reliance on ancient philosophical positions, and the vision of the problem is less emotional and more pragmatic. At the same time, globalization is making its own adjustments, and today we can observe a blending of approaches. In the West, interest in Eastern holism, deep ecology is



growing, while in the East, interest in Western environmental movements and technologies is increasing. This convergence of ideas is often embraced by young people. Youth in global cities of the Far East (Shanghai, Seoul, Tokyo) think similarly to their peers in Berlin or San Francisco, sharing the values of sustainable development. It is important to note in this process the significance of aesthetics in shaping ecological consciousness, regardless of the initial theoretical and practical inputs. In the West, ecological aesthetics becomes more of an inquiry into the possibility of overcoming the subject-object paradigm and forming new representations; in China, it involves forming a new discourse with reference to tradition. In any case, aesthetic reflections are tied to practice and attempt to achieve greater coherence between beliefs and actions at different levels.

## CONCLUSION

Culture exists precisely in the tension between the poles of conceptualization and everyday life. Effective research requires constant reflexive navigation between these levels, refusing to reduce one to the other, and being prepared to work with the inevitable contradictions, ruptures, and non-linear connections. Acknowledging this difficulty does not weaken the research position; on the contrary, it allows one to avoid oversimplifications and create a more adequate, multidimensional picture of cultural reality.

Environmental sustainability has become an important factor in the modernization of production and life, and this is both a consequence and a sign of the development of globalization trends and perspectives on world processes. But the path of environmental modernization for each community is unique, as it depends on factors at different levels. Aesthetic representations manifest themselves in the reality of everyday practices and micro-decisions, micro-choices. Eastern countries are undergoing or have recently passed a stage of rapid industrial growth, where environmental costs were long considered a necessary evil, and now a balance between development and ecology is being sought. Most Western countries passed the stage of “dirty” industrialization long ago and now export harmful production to other countries. Today, they have the resources and technologies for a “green” transition.

A characteristic feature of ecological aesthetics as a phenomenon of post-non-classical thinking is its dialogic nature. The traditional dialogue between Eastern and Western aesthetics, aesthetics and ethics, art and natural science is complemented by a search for a communicative space between aesthetics and socio-economic, legal, and technical knowledge. Awareness of global risks and efforts to change practices of interaction with nature are not a concession to alarmism or fashion, but a responsible step that all communities on the planet must take, regardless of their cultural particularities. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that different countries and cultures have vastly different starting points: the current state of affairs in the environmental sphere, their own ideas of how things ought to be, their own philosophical categories, and their own habits. Moreover, economic inequality and historical features of modernization add not only differences but also raise the question of justice and responsibility for the



consequences of human activity. These are important questions that cannot be addressed within the scope of a single article, but it is important to keep them in mind. In this case, several factors in the process of forming ecological consciousness were examined, demonstrating the diverse range of possible paths along this journey.

## REFERENCES

- Berleant, A. (1992). *Art and Engagement*. Temple University Press.
- Berleant, A. (1997). *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*. University Press of Kansas.
- Berleant, A. (2010). *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*. Imprint Academic.
- Brooks, A. L., Wang, S., & Jambeck, J. R. (2018). The Chinese Import Ban and its Impact on Global Plastic Waste Trade. *Science Advances*, 4(6). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aat0131>
- Carlson, A. (1999). *The Aesthetics of Environment*. Temple University Press.
- Dzikevich, S. A., & Tang, Z. (2025). Teoreticheskie i prakticheskie aspekty esteticheskogo otnosheniya k okruzhayushchey srede v sovremennom Kitae [Theoretical and practical aspects of the aesthetic attitude to the environment in modern China]. *Obshchestvo: filosofiya, istoriya, kultura*, 3, 33–40. <https://doi.org/10.24158/fik.2025.3.3>
- European Commission. (2018). Directive (EU) 2018/851 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste. *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/851/oj>
- Eurostat. (2024). *Recycling Rates of Municipal Waste*. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Municipal\\_waste\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Municipal_waste_statistics)
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 3–30). Basic Books.
- Hepburn, R. W. (1966). Contemporary aesthetics and the neglect of natural beauty. In B. Williams & A. Montefiore (Eds.), *British analytical philosophy* (pp. 328–342). Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jessen, J. (2025, January 22). WM’s Recycling Report: Do Americans really recycle? *Sustainability Magazine*. <https://sustainabilitymag.com/news/wms-recycling-report-do-americans-really-recycle>
- Lavee, D., & Nardiya, S. (2023). The Impact of Deposit-refund Schemes on the Recycling of Beverage Containers: A Cross-country Analysis. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 188, 106674. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2022.106674>
- Li, Z. (2020). Ekologicheskoe iskusstvo v traditsionnoy kitayskoy kulture [Environmental art in traditional Chinese culture]. *Culture and Art*, 8, 45–52.
- Liu, X. (2024). Proiskhozhdenie sovremennoy kitayskoy ekologicheskoy estetiki iz protsessualnogo ponimaniya prirody A.N. Uaytkheda, marksistskoy dialektiki i kontseptualnykh pozitsiy traditsionnoy kitayskoy filosofii [The Origin of Modern Chinese Ecological Aesthetics from the Processual Understanding of Nature by



- A.N. Whitehead, Marxist Dialectics, and Conceptual Positions of Traditional Chinese Philosophy]. *Obshchestvo: filosofiya, istoriya, kultura*, 4, 103–109. <https://doi.org/10.24158/fik.2024.4.14>
- Marques, R. C., da Cruz, N. F., & Carvalho, P. (2022). Digitalization and the circular economy in municipal solid waste management: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 368, 133150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.133150>
- Matsuda, T., & Hirai, Y. (2021). Recycling and waste management policies in Japan: A review. *Journal of Material Cycles and Waste Management*, 23(5), 1711–1722. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10163-021-01262-9>
- Matthews, P. (2002). Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60(1), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6245.00053>
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2023). *China Statistical Yearbook 2023*. China Statistics Press.
- Park, S., & Lah, T. J. (2020). Analyzing the success of the volume-based waste fee system in South Korea. *Waste Management*, 105, 492–502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wasman.2020.02.030>
- Parsons, G. (2002). Nature Appreciation, Science, and Positive Aesthetics. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42(3), 279–295. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/42.3.279>
- Perelomov, L. S. (2004). “Chetveroknizhie” - klyuch k postizheniyu konfutsianstva [“The Four Books” - The Key to Understanding Confucianism]. In *Konfutsianskoe “Chetveroknizhie” (“Sy shu”)* (pp. 5–32). Vostochnaya literatura.
- Prozersky, V. V. (2013a). Ekologicheskaya estetika na rubezhe stoletiy: Vybor kontseptualnogo puti [Environmental Aesthetics at the Turn of the Century: The Choice of a Conceptual Path]. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Series 17. Philosophy. Conflict Studies. Cultural Studies. Religious Studies*, 3, 22–28.
- Prozersky, V. V. (2013b). Ot estetiki obekta k estetike sredy [From the Aesthetics of the Object to the Aesthetics of the Environment]. *Vestnik of Pushkin Leningrad State University*, 2(3), 88–96.
- Rolston, H., III. (1988). *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Temple University Press.
- Rybakov, V. V. (2022). Ot avangarda k iskusstvu zhizni: ob esteticheskoy transformatsii rossiyskogo mentaliteta [From Avant-garde to the Art of Living: On the Aesthetic Transformation of the Russian Mentality]. *Terra Aestheticae*, 2, 114–135.
- Saito, Y. (1985). The Japanese Appreciation of Nature. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25(3), 239–251. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/25.3.239>
- Saito, Y. (2007). *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.
- Saito, Y. (2017). *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-making*. Oxford University Press.
- Tsybanov, S. S. (2022). Ekologicheskaya etika v Kitae (v kontekste traditsionnykh religioznykh ucheniy) [Environmental Ethics in China (in the Context of Traditional Religious Teachings)]. *Kontekst i refleksiya: filosofiya o mire i cheloveke*, 11(1A), 98–104. <https://doi.org/10.34670/AR.2022.70.92.012>



- TRES. (2025–2026). *Castaway: The Afterlife of Plastic* [Installation]. Peabody Museum. <https://peabody.harvard.edu/castaway-afterlife-plastic>
- Van Eygen, E., Laner, D., & Fellner, J. (2020). Integrating High-resolution Material Flow Data into Waste Management Planning: A Case Study for Plastic Packaging in Austria. *Environmental Science & Technology*, 54(19), 11915–11924. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.0c03466>
- Wen, Z., Xie, Y., Chen, M., & Dinga, C. D. (2021). China's Plastic Import Ban Increases Prospects of Environmental Impact Mitigation of Plastic Waste Trade Flow Worldwide. *Nature Communications*, 12(1), 425. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-20509-3>
- Xu, M., Zhang, Y., Li, J., & Zhang, H. (2023). The Effectiveness and Challenges of Mandatory Municipal Solid Waste Sorting Policy in Shanghai, China: A Case Study. *Journal of Material Cycles and Waste Management*, 25(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10163-022-01547-7>
- Zhang, B., Lai, K. H., Wang, B., & Wang, Z. (2022). From intention to action: How do personal attitudes and social norms influence residential waste sorting behavior in China? *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 180, 106–152. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2021.106152>

#### СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / THE AUTHOR

Васильева Марина Александровна,  
ma.vasilyeva@gmail.com,  
ORCID 0000-0002-8874-4623

Marina Vasilyeva  
ma.vasilyeva@gmail.com,  
ORCID 0000-0002-8874-4623

Статья поступила 2 января 2026  
одобрена после рецензирования 20 февраля 2026  
принята к публикации 22 марта 2026

Received: 2 January 2026  
Revised: 20 February 2026  
Accepted: 22 March 2026