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On the Publishing Boom of Natural History Books in China in the 21st Century and the Reasons Behind It

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Abstract: Natural history, a discipline of ecological significance, is regaining popularity in China, especially after 2010, thanks to the promotion of academics in the history of science and technology. A series of natural history books have been published, creating a publishing boom. Natural history books in China are experiencing growth in numbers and genre with more accurate segmentation in themes, indicating that the natural history publication trade is going to mature. By genre, most natural history books are primary, focusing on basic knowledge about birds, animals, and plants, while the secondary books focusing on the historical and theoretical study of natural history make up only a small portion. In the early 20th century, natural history books saw a boom driven by peoples' enthusiastic pursuit of science. Today, natural history books follow the tides of building an ecological civilization, reaching out to the domain of "natural history and the public." There will be broad prospects for books featuring "natural history +," such as "natural history + painting," "natural history + literature," "natural history + food," and "natural history + tourism."

Keywords: natural history, natural history books, primary, secondary, "natural history +"

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The term natural history (*Bo Wu Xue* in Chinese Pinyin) was introduced to China from the West in the early days of the Republic of China (1912–1949). It is a discipline of inquiring about factors in the natural environment, in particular animals, plants, and minerals prevailing in Europe between the Renaissance and the 19th century. Typical natural history research comes in various forms, such as observational records, investigative reports, and literature compilations. Natural history and ecology are closely linked, with ecology being natural history in the advanced stage. In recent years, natural history has been gaining popularity in China, leading to increasing enthusiasm among the academic community and the general public. Scholars specializing in the history of science and technology, such as Liu Huajie, Wu Guosheng, Jiang Xiaoyuan, and Tian Song, have endeavored to promote research in natural history. The Forum for Cultures of Natural History held five sessions in Beijing, Chengdu, and other cities from 2015 to 2021. In the field of communication, Guokr.com has ushered in rapid development, and WeChat official accounts featuring “natural history” also attract many followers. In 2004, *Chinese National Geography* launched the journal *Nature History*, which has a monthly circulation of over 220,000 copies and attracted more than 12 million followers on its official Weibo account by 2016. In terms of public environmental protection education activities, competitions featuring field notes on science and nature at the national, provincial, and city levels are in full swing. In terms of social organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on environmental protection have mushroomed. In addition, a number of natural history apps, such as “Xing Se” (an app to identify plants), have gained popularity.

As China is striving to build an ecological civilization, it is particularly significant to revive natural history. All this has contributed to the bulk publications of natural history books in China since the early days of the 21st century. These books are an important part of China’s natural history culture. In recent years, a publishing boom has emerged for such books. By examining the current publishing situation of natural history books and tracing their publishing history, this paper intends to comprehensively explore their current development course, determine the reasons for their revival, and provide referential suggestions for the publishing of natural history books.

Publishing Boom and Trend of Natural History Books in China in the 21st Century

China has witnessed rapid development in the publication of natural history books since the beginning of the new century. According to rough statistics, more than 300 kinds of new natural history books (excluding popular science books for children) were published in the mainland from 2017 to 2021. Nearly 60 publishing houses are engaged

in the natural history book business and have planned natural history book series, such as the “Natural History Series” by the Commercial Press, the “Natural History Collections” by Beijing University Press, the “Natural History Culture Series” by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, “Repair Our Planet Series” by Shanghai Scientific and Technological Education Press, “Western Natural History Collections” by East China Normal University Press, and “Blue Cicada Series” by Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press. In addition, CITIC Press Group and Chongqing University Press have also launched a wide variety of natural history books. Guangxi Normal University Press Group is also preparing a grand publishing program. Given the publication planning in recent years, the *History of Science and Technology in China* (illustrated edition for teenagers), a key project of the Publication Plan of “13th Five-Year” National Key Publications, features a special section on natural history. More than 30 natural history books, including the “Chinese Ecological and Natural History Series,” *Chinese Natural History Study and Illustration for Tibetan Ecological and Natural History*, are also included as key publications of the Publication Plan of “14th Five-Year” National Key Publications. The publication of these books has contributed to the boom in natural history.

In addition, China has established several natural history book awards in recent years, including the “Dapeng Natural Children’s Book Award,” the “China Nature Book Award,” and the “Pingshan Natural History Book Award,” which have also contributed to the prosperous publication of natural history books. In 2019, the organizers of the above awards launched their respective “Top Ten Nature Books” programs, and several natural history books were shortlisted for the awards. They include *Notes of Hai Cuo Tu*, *Natural History of Hong Kong*, *Thinking Like a Mountain*, *The Drunken Botanist*, *Lure Fishing in Beijing*, *The Living Mountains*, *The Notes of Plants in Wuhan*, and *The Evolution of Beauty*. In the same year, among 37 books, *Western Cultures & Natural History* and *Fantastic Flora: Centennial Chinese Plant Science Paintings* won the “China Book Award” set up by the China Society for Book Review. Original natural history books, such as *A Tree in the North (Follow the Seasons in Nature)* and *Birds Outside the Window (A Report on Bird Watching at Home in Wuhan)*, were shortlisted in the 2021 Pingshan Natural History Book Award. In recent years, natural history books have been regulars in the shortlists of the Wenjin Book Award of the National Library of China and the “Books of the Month” of China Reading Weekly. Moreover, natural history-themed books are now included in the authoritative awards of the Chinese publishing industry. For example, at the seventh Chinese Excellent Publication Awards, *China Spiders Illustrated* and *Goldfish of China (Descriptions and Illustrations of Diverse Goldfish of China)* were presented the Excellent Book Award, and other natural history books, such as the *Illustrations of Common Insects in Dalian* and *Notes of Hai Cuo Tu* were nominated.

In addition to the increase in the number of publications and award genres, the segmentation of book themes also indicates that the natural history book industry is maturing. Liu Huajie, Professor of Science and Technology History at Peking University, suggested a three-tier system for natural history research. The primary research includes such practical activities as direct observations, descriptions, and classification of animals and plants. The recommended secondary research studies of the above-mentioned activities focus on the perspectives of philosophy, sociology, and history. And research on the historiography and historical science of natural history is tertiary (Liu, 2010). At present, the publications of natural books in China are mainly about primary and secondary research.

Primary Natural History Books

The primary research aims to introduce basic knowledge about birds, animals, and plants, spread knowledge about natural history and promote it among the general public. Most of the natural history books published in China are primary.

The first category is the handbooks and illustrations about nature. Natural history is built on people's observations and records of plants and animals, mountains and rivers, minerals, climate, and the ecology of a region. Therefore, the local nature handbooks are the basic category of natural history books. Many provinces in China have compiled handbooks to facilitate regional investigations, research, and resource development, such as the *Flora of Guangxi* (6 volumes), the *Flora of Shandong* (2 volumes), and the *Nature Notes of Beijing*. There are also nature handbooks published based on different natural environments in different regions, such as "Handbooks of Wild Flowers in China Series" by Henan Science and Technology Press, *Illustrations of Common Insects in Dalian*, *Plants of Shennongjia*, and *An Identification Guide to the Birds of Qinling Mountains*. These handbooks are usually compiled by local scientific research institutions or professional editorial boards in this regard because they must be professional, popular, cross-disciplinary, and require systematic research. In addition to the handbooks classified by regions, several natural history books classified by species are also published. For example, "My Basic Book of Natural History Series," published by Beijing Institute of Technology Press, includes *My Butterfly Book*, *My Flower Book*, and *My Plant Specimen Book*. "The Natural History Museum Series" by Peking University Press covers different categories, such as shells, beetles, mushrooms, and viruses. There are also natural history handbooks that combine local characteristics and specific species studies. For example, *Goldfish of China* is the first natural history illustration handbook that details nearly 300 varieties of goldfish in China. The book *Fish Around Us* mainly introduces wild native fish living in Wuhan City and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. These natural history notes and illustrations with local characteristics are categories preferred

by local publishing houses as they can help people understand the natural environments where they live.

The second category is nature travel records and observation journals. These books are of scientific, aesthetic, and humanistic significance, and are usually well-polished, with beautiful illustrations and covers, so they often make the bestseller lists. Liu Huajie's works, such as *Personal Encounters with Plants*, *Botanical Journeys in Hawaii*, *Wild Flowers in Chongli*, and *A History of Menghai's Native Plants*, integrate the local environment characteristics and ecological awareness of contemporary new natural history, providing a basic paradigm for such books. There are also other representative books in this regard, such as *How to See Deer (50 Ways to Get along with Nature)*, *Handbook of Birds (Notes on Bird Watching in Southern Cities)*, *Flora of Northwest China*, and *Illustrations of Diverse Plants*. Such books combine natural history knowledge with literary citations, historical knowledge, personal life experiences, and local environments, expanding the connotation of natural history books and increasing their readability. In addition, notes on campus natural history also increase year by year. Representative works include *Memories of Plants and Flowers in Peking University*, *The Plants of Yanyuan*, *A Guide to the Plants of Yanyuan*, *Plants and Flowers in Nankai University*, and *Know the Seasons: The 24 Solar Terms in Shandong University*. These books integrating campus life and natural history are a new branch of humanistic natural history books.

The third category is the classics of primary natural history. In the mid-1990s, many Western nature classics were introduced into China in the name of nature literature in the wake of ecocriticism. At the beginning of the 21st century, these books were retranslated and republished with the theme of natural history along with the revival of natural history. The "Blue Cicada Series" published by Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press includes the Chinese versions of such Western classics as *Wake-Robin*, *The Complete Angler*, *The Stories of Birds*, *A Sand County Almanac*, *The Country Diary of An Edwardian Lady*, *Walden*, *Cape Cod*, *The Hike*, and *Under the Sea-Wind*. To restore the natural history characteristics of these works and help readers to rethink these long-misread classics, the press has made professional pre-eminence to accurately name the plants, trees, birds, and beasts that appear in these books. In addition, many of the foreign natural history classics have been translated and reprinted in China with the joint efforts of various publishing houses, including Aristotle's *History of Animals*, Gaius Plinius Secundus' *Historia Naturalis*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letters on the Elements of Botany*, Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, John James Audubon's *The Bible of Birds*, and Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*. Meanwhile, efforts are also being made to sort out the traditional Chinese classics on natural history. Ancient classical works, such as the *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*

(*Shan Hai Jing*), *Records of Diverse Matters (Bowuzhi)*, *Shen-nong's Herbal Classics (Shennong Bencaojing)*, *Commentary on the Water Classic (Shui Jing Zhu)*, *Compendium of Materia Medica (Bencao Gangmu)*, *Xu Xiake's Travels*, and the *Illustrated Catalogue of Plants (Zhiwu Mingshi Tukao)* have been re-edited and republished, some of which are illustrated.

Secondary Natural History Books

Secondary natural history books, with a focus on historical and theoretical research, target natural history lovers and scholars in related, but specialized fields, the number of whom is small. For the sake of profits, there are few secondary natural history books being published at present.

Biographies of naturalists and research on their thoughts are the most popular secondary natural history books. Most of them are introduced from foreign countries, such as *The Complete Naturalist: The Life of Linnaeus*, *On Joseph Banks, Sex, Botany and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks*, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, *On John Ray's Natural History*, *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of A Literary Genius*, and *Naturalist: An Autobiography by Naturalist Edward O. Wilson*. As a combination of natural history and biography, these books are engaging with high readability and are popular among readers.

Research-oriented books on natural history and the culture behind it are the second most popular secondary natural history books. Such books mainly elaborate on the development of natural history as a scientific discipline and its traditions and examine their social, historical, and cultural backgrounds. There are books both introduced from other countries and written by local academics. Foreign books include *Finding Order in Nature*, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History*, *A bird in the Bush: A Social History of Birdwatching*, *Discovering Birds: The Emergence of Ornithology as A Scientific Discipline: 1760-1850*, *A Study of Western Women's Natural History Painting*, and *The Controversy over the Classification of American Plants*. There are also a number of original natural history books written by Chinese academics, such as Liu Huajie, Wu Guosheng, Jiang Xiaoyuan, Liu Bing, Tian Song, and Liu Yidong. Liu Huajie's representative books, such as *Western Cultures & Natural History*, *On Natural History*, and *Living as a Naturalist*, are high-quality theoretical monographs of natural history published in China with high professionalism and systematic analysis.

Secondary natural books are the physical carriers of natural history theories despite their low attendance on the bestseller lists. As theoretical research on natural history becomes more popular, these books are expected to become bestsellers in the future. Such books are increasingly favored by various domestic book awards. To name a few, Liu

Huajie's *Western Cultures & Natural History* was included in the "China Book Award" in 2019, and the *Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* won the "Thought of the Year Award" at the first China Nature Books Awards.

"Natural History +" Books

In addition to primary and secondary natural history books, there are also books published in a "Natural History +" mode.

Natural history was regarded as a highly professional discipline, while contemporary natural history is an extensive one that integrates the basic knowledge of ancient Chinese natural history and the public-oriented development pattern of Western natural history, highlighting the ecological connotations of natural history. Therefore, in the publishing practice, the scholarly, disciplined nature of natural history was gradually downplayed, and more attention was paid to emotional attitudes and values. The definition of natural history books has been extended accordingly, and it has become an important cultural medium for spreading natural history knowledge, delivering natural history spirit, and promoting natural history awareness. At present, natural history books emphasize more on emotional experiences and ecological awareness and are no longer the only way to spread knowledge in this regard. The natural history spirit^① that is public-oriented and practice-based has become the cultural core to define such books. Therefore, all books with a natural history spirit can be classified as natural history books. Liu Huajie (2017) proposed a "natural history +" mode in publishing natural history books, arguing that there is no need to overemphasize discipline classification during the process, and more crossover topics, such as "natural history + popular science," "natural history + painting," "natural history + literature," "natural history + food," and "natural history + tourism," should be explored to expand the content of the natural history genre.

"Natural + popular science" books come in various publication types and large numbers and are an important part of children's popular science books. Therefore, such books should be listed separately when counting the publications of natural books. These books were named "Popular Science 2.0" by Liu (2017). Compared with traditional popular science books, they are exquisitely illustrated and covered, emphasize interest rather than doctrine, and advocate the integration of book reading and outdoor practice. Some brand series have been formed in this field, such as the "DK Little Naturalist" by Sichuan Children's Publishing House, "Secrets of Nature" by Chemical Industry Press,

① Liu Huajie defines the contemporary new "natural history spirit" as follows: (a) Emphasizing the emotional penetration of the subject; (b) Advocating the organic and holistic view of nature; (c) It is a kind of practical knowledge rather than empty talk on paper. It leads to a kind of life in which people and nature harmoniously coexist with each other; (d) It establishes a suitable "buffer zone" between common sense and modern science, with an extremely low threshold. Please refer to Liu Huajie's article "Outline of Natural History" published by the *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities* (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), 2011, 33 (6), 2-11.

“Nature Museum” by the Oriental Press, and “Natural Collections Illustrated” by China Friendship Publishing Company. Natural history books made up 10 percent to 17 percent of the Top 100 popular science books at dangdang.com from 2017 to 2019. *Notes of Hai Cuo Tu* (3 volumes), *What A Plant Knows* (Chinese Version), and *Créatures Fantastiques* (Chinese Version) are regulars on the chart.

Substantial achievements have also been made in the field of “natural history + literature,” including creation- and research-based books. In terms of literary writing, there are natural history essays represented by A Lai’s *The Utopia of Grasses and Trees: Phenology Biography in Chengdu*, Wei An’s *All that Happens on the Earth*, and Xuan Wu’s *Raise Flowers: The Nature Notes*, natural history novels, such as *Chu Tong: My Wildlife Friends and Me*, and documentary work, such as *My 35 years of Work as a Conservationist on Baima Snow Mountain*. In terms of literature research, there are Han Yusheng’s *Vanilla Beauty: Plant Images in Songs of Chu*, and work by Pan Fujun, a botanist from Taiwan, China, including *Botanical Illustration in the Book of Songs*, *Botanical Illustrations in the Songs of Chu*, *Botanical Illustration in Tang Poetry*, *Botanical Illustration in A Dream in Red Mansions*, *Botanical Illustration in Idioms and Allusions*, and *Romance on Plants (Plant World in Chinese Classical Literature)*. These books refresh the natural history knowledge in Chinese classical literature and are popular among readers.

Books featuring “natural history + food” have also emerged, such as *Eating on the Wild Side: The Missing Link to Optimum Health* in the “Natural History, Ecology and Civilization Library Series,” and *Biological Evolution at the Dinner Table*, *The Secret of Fruit*, *Botany of Vegetables*, and *Investigation of the Bones after Meals* in “Eiken Maetsu’s Hand-painted Natural History Series.” In the category of “Natural history + painting,” there are publications, such as *Botany for the Artist*, *Botanical Sketchbooks*, and *A Hand-painting Diary of Succulents*. These books are generally of high appreciation and collection value. The “natural history + tourism” books that won the Annual Natural History Award of Dapeng Natural Children’s Book Award include *Lure Fishing in Beijing*, *Guide for Birding in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*, and *Birding Travel Guide in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region*.

The Origin of Natural History Books in China

The publishing boom of natural history books was not achieved overnight. It is essential to trace the development course of the publishing of natural history books in order to gain a better understanding of its prosperity.

With a time-honored farming civilization, China has its own splendid cultural traditions in natural history. As is said in *The Origin and Development of Chinese*

Natural History by Xue Fengchang, published in 1914, natural history in China originated in ancient times, took initial shape during the period of Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, and became mature in the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties. It experienced ups and downs during its development and passed on to the present day (Xue, 1914). The birds, beasts, plants, and trees described in the *Book of Songs* were depicted based on daily observations, which is similar to the natural history today. Confucius Wrote in the *Great Treatise II* of the *Book of Changes (Zhouyi Xici)* that “Anciently, when Bao-xi had come to the rule of all under heaven, looking up, he contemplated the brilliant forms exhibited in the sky, and looking down he surveyed the patterns shown on the earth. He contemplated the ornamental appearances of birds and beasts and the (different) suitabilities of the soil. Near at hand, in his own person, he found things for consideration, and the same at a distance, in things in general.” This indicated that natural history had come into being at that time (Wu, 1943). The ancient Chinese dictionary *Erya* details grasses, trees, birds, insects, and fish providing a model of natural history for later generations. The *Classic of Mountains and Rivers (Shan Hai Jing)* gives a graphic account of the mountains and rivers, geography, resources, and herbs in China, laying a foundation for Chinese classical natural history. There were several other Chinese natural history books, including *The Records of Diverse Matters (Bowuzhi)* by Zhang Hua, a scholar in the Western Jin Dynasty, which records the ancient Chinese birds and beasts as well as geological landforms, filling the gap in Chinese natural history books. In addition, such classics as *Shen-nong’s Herbal Classics (Shennong Bencaojing)*, *Remarks on the Wildlife in Shijing*, *Flora in the Lingnan Area*, *Commentary on the Water Classic (Shui Jing Zhu)*, *Phylogeny for Peony in Yangzhou*, *Phylogeny for Camellia in Yunnan*, *Camellia in Yunnan*, *Xu Xiake’s Travels*, *Compendium of Materia Medica (Bencao Gangmu)*, and the *Kangxi Collection of the Investigations of Things in Leisure Time*, and *Phylogeny for Chrysanthemum*. These books suggest that Chinese natural history features extensive coverage of multiple topics.

Such an extensive coverage of topics reflects the Chinese philosophy of living in harmony with nature. Essentially, Chinese classical natural history is people-oriented, focusing on relationships between people and nature. The affinity with nature is a defining characteristic of Chinese classical natural history (Yu, 2013). By Western standards, Chinese classical natural history as a discipline is not that systematic and professional, but its humanistic characteristics are exactly echoing the Western Arcadian tradition.

In China, modern natural history books emerged in the late Qing Dynasty when Chinese traditional natural history was collapsing. Natural history books saw the first boom in China in the early 20th century when the Western natural history system characterized by specialty education was introduced to China, which had established

a modern publishing industry and a modern educational system. In the early 20th century, China was exploring ways to modernize, generating an upsurge of enthusiasm for democracy and science among the general public. This was the fundamental reason behind the boom. At that time, natural history was sometimes called “natural science.” The theory of “saving the nation by developing science” created a special bond between science and the national salvation movement. Popularizing science was the only way to change the backward economy of China, reform the outdated thinking of the people, and build a prosperous and modern country. Against this backdrop, natural history books that kept pace with the times obtained a wide range of readers.

In late 1897, the Chinese version of *Evolution and Ethics*, translated by Yan Fu, was published in the *Compilation of National News*, causing a sensation among the public and the academic community. Although Yan failed to faithfully translate Thomas Henry Huxley’s work and made the Chinese version more political through adaption, he was the first Chinese to systematically introduce the ideas of natural history through translation. In 1902, Yu Heyin compiled China’s first textbook on natural history, promoting the integration of natural history into China’s education system. Du Yaquan was another important contributor to the rapid development of natural history in China. Under his guidance, the Commercial Press published a series of natural history books, including textbooks such as *Zoology* (1912), *Botany* (1913), and *General Geology* (1927); classics, such as Jean-Henri Casimir Fabre’s *The Story Book of Science* (1931), and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s *Philosophie Zoologique* (1937); dictionaries, such as the *Dictionary of Botany* (1918) and the *Dictionary of Zoology* (1922); popular science books, such as *Insect, Fish, Bird and Beast* (1929) in the “Teenager Natural Science Series,” *Animals and Insects* (1943) and *Fish and Birds* (1943); and illustrations, such as the *Illustrated Catalogue of Plants (Zhiwu Mingshi Tukao)* (1919) and *Illustrations of Birds* (1936). In addition to the Commercial Press, other publishing houses also engaged in the publication of natural history books during the early period of the Republic of China, including the Zhonghua Book Company, the World Book Company, the Kaiming Bookstore, the Beixin Book Company, the Cheng Hing Company, and the Cheng Chung Book Company.

Compared with the emphasis of contemporary new natural history on “natural history spirit” and “new sensibility” and the advocacy of extensive tradition in classic natural history, natural history during the early period of the Republic of China paid more attention to practicality. As a result, it attached more importance to the professionalism of natural history knowledge and rational considerations. This is mainly manifested in the discipline-oriented development of natural history. In the *Source of Words (Ciyuan)*, published by the Commercial Press in 1916, “natural history is defined as a science to study various things in nature in a broad sense and the general term of zoology, botany,

mineralogy, and physiology in a narrow sense. When it comes to natural history, we often use it in a narrow sense.” The basic task of natural history is to observe, describe and classify animals, plants, minerals, and ecological systems (Liu, 2014). As an important physical carrier to spread natural history knowledge, natural history books embrace the research results of the above disciplines. Therefore, in the primary books, illustrated books occupy a large proportion, while travel notes and journals with scientific, aesthetic, and humanistic characteristics are fewer in number. The number of published secondary books is small and scattered throughout various disciplines. The classical extensive tradition was mostly found in the writings of scholars, such as Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Xia Mianzun, and Ye Lingfeng.

By the 1930s, with the specializations in science, the branches of the above-mentioned disciplines were separated from natural history, making the latter a discipline with a hollow structure.

Analysis of the Reason for the Revival of Natural History

In the 1980s, when China started its reform and opening up, foreign books of various disciplines were introduced to the country, and natural history was one of them. This time, natural history returned with different Chinese names, such as *Zi Ran Shi* (literally, history of nature), *Zi Ran Zhi* (literally, the record of natural history), and *Bo Wu Zhi* (literally, natural science). The natural history book market began to thrive in the 21st century. The Commercial Press was one of the pioneers. In the 21st century, the Commercial Press kept abreast of the market trends, reorganized the publishing history of natural history books, and participated in the planning and publishing of a series of natural history books. Its representative publications included the “Natural Library,” the “Natural Elegance,” the “Natural Perception,” the “Natural Observation,” and the “Natural Journey” series.

It is worth noting that the connotations and value orientations of natural history are changing with the times. Contemporary natural history has taken on a new look during its revival. Instead of directly inheriting the natural history in the early 20th century featuring “professional education,” it is evolving into a discipline serving the public, one that combines the merit of traditional Chinese education, focusing on developing a broad range of knowledge and the humanist tradition of Western natural history. The surge in the publications of primary natural history books and the emergence of “natural history+” books are important trends. To understand the revival of the natural history book market after more than half a century, we must focus on the new changes in this revival, bring them back to the present situation and reexamine these issues in a new context.

The Flourishing Nature Education Provides a Broad Market for the Publication of Natural History Books

In 2014, the first China Nature Education Forum was held in Xiamen, marking the exploration of China in nature education modes. Nature education allows people to feel, understand and get close to nature in the natural environment, to help cultivate a healthy outlook on nature and life, and foster positive values. Nature education in China is becoming full-fledged. Programs such as nature observations, scientific explorations, and outdoor survival, have been launched with the sponsorship of non-governmental organizations. So far, more than 60 percent of the public has realized the significance of nature education, according to the *2019 Report for China Nature Education Development*. In this context, Liu Huajie, Wu Guosheng, and other academics began to advocate for natural history education. As an integral part of nature education, natural history education combines knowledge with practice and guides people to appreciate the “natural history spirit” in life and pursue harmonious coexistence with nature by viewing the world from a naturalist’s perspective, living as a naturalist, and acquiring natural knowledge.

Nowadays, in responding to the call of reviving natural history, the functions of natural history education in enriching knowledge, broadening horizons, and enhancing the relationship between humans and nature are further valued and have been integrated into preschool, primary, and middle school education. In recent years, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China has launched a series of study tours for primary and middle school students, among which natural history travel is becoming a hit. In the science course of primary schools, there is also much content about natural history, which underlines the coexistence between humans and nature. It has also penetrated college campuses. Liu launched a stimulating selective course called “An Introduction to Natural History” at Peking University, making nature an outdoor classroom.

Natural history education is appealing to ever-increasing numbers of students and parents. They advocate acquiring knowledge and understanding the world through nature awareness rather than spoon-feeding, thus making traditional popular science books no longer suitable for nature education. The knowledge of natural history, which emphasizes practical and local knowledge, and natural history books, which build a connection between books and nature, are in tune with this teaching philosophy, which in turn contributes to the natural history fad. In addition, nature education is also a new part of quality-oriented education, which values ideology and morality and the physical and mental health of students. It stresses cultivating children’s conception of nature, life attitudes, and ways of thinking in field practice. As such, natural history books published in recent years feature not only extensive knowledge but also the holistic idea of natural

history. Such books express the passion for and spirit of natural history and advocate living harmoniously with nature.

The Publication Boom of Natural History Books Reflects People's Desire to Reconnect with Nature Against the Backdrop of Industrialization and Urbanization

With rapid industrial and agricultural development, significant changes in the production modes of material goods, unchecked exploitation of natural resources, and the sharp rise in population, the tension between people and nature has been growing, leading to emotional estrangement between humans and nature. According to the *Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2019 National Economic and Social Development* released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, by the end of 2019, the urbanization rate of permanent residents in Chinese mainland reached 60.6 percent, about 16 percentage points higher than that with household registrations. This indicates that a growing number of people are migrating from the countryside and flooding into cities. People are often transfixed by the Internet in their daily life. A report released by QuestMobile, a data platform, shows that Chinese people spent an average of 6.2 hours a day on electronic mobile devices in 2019. Modern people spend more time in the virtual world of the Internet than in nature.

Edward O. Wilson wrote in *The Diversity of Life* that we would fall from heaven if we forgot what nature means to us (Wilson, 2004). Human beings are naturally attached to nature. Nature is not only a part of our physical world but also our spiritual world, and the “mother” and “mentor” of human beings. Exposure to nature can help relieve stress and alleviate emotions, such as depression and anxiety. More importantly, it is conducive to the cognitive, emotional, and moral development of humans. If we abandon nature and destroy it, human culture will, as Marcel Robischon warns in *Vom Verstummen der Welt*, decline with the disappearance of the colors, fragrances, and sounds of various creatures.

Amid today's high-speed modernization, more and more people are feeling spiritually lost in our consumer society and are beginning to seek their spiritual roots from nature consciously or unconsciously. Scott D. Sampson noted that it is an urgent task to heal the psychological rift caused by the separation of people and nature in the 21st century (Sampson, 2017). Natural history offers quick access to nature. It not only guides people to pay attention to the natural landscape around them, observe animals, plants, insects, mountains and rivers, and geological minerals in their local environment but also encourages people to get out of the virtual world and embrace the real world, thus healing their souls through close contact with nature and admire the harmony of the universe. Western natural history classics, such as Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, and John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, all show readers ways to live as a naturalist, which can heal

people's spirits. Such books are popular among readers and are reprinted many times.

Developing Natural History will Contribute to the Building of an Eco-friendly Society, for which Natural History Books are an Important Medium to Spread Ecological Ideas

To cope with the ecological crisis, China put forward the strategy of “vigorously promoting ecological progress” in the report of the 18th CPC National Congress and issued the *Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Progress* in 2015. In 2017, the 19th CPC National Congress included the concept of “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets” in the Constitution of the Communist Party of China. In 2018, the idea of ecological progress was included in the Amendment to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which fundamentally identified ecological progress as an important task in building socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. The revival of natural history is taking place in this social and political context.

Nowadays, as biology, geology, ecology, and other sciences are maturing, there is no longer a shortage of natural science researchers, but there is an urgent need for people who can speak for nature. The former leaves the ecological discourse power in the hands of very few, while the latter returns it to the public on the premise of ensuring the integrity of the ecosystem. Humanistic naturalists, such as Gilbert White, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, fall into the latter category, who showed later generations, through their research and actions, that natural science is conducive to an eco-friendly society. First, natural history is a subject of regional environments. Its practical and easy-to-learn knowledge guides people to be aware of and understand the physical environment in which they are living. Second, natural history advocates holistic thinking and respects the subjectivity of nature, and asks people to revere and protect nature and seek coexistence with all creatures. Practicing the knowledge of natural science helps the public to become involved with nature on an emotional level.

The value of books lies in spreading knowledge and culture, exchanging thoughts and emotions, and advancing social progress. If natural history books in the early Republic of China were to spread scientific knowledge and promote agricultural reforms, then contemporary ones should focus more on emotional communications and ecological progress. It is fair to say that the revival of natural history books is responding to the call of the times for ecological progress and prevails among the public.

Conclusion

There were two periods witnessing a boom of natural history books in Chinese publishing history. The first one occurred in the background of “rejuvenating China”

and “saving the country by developing science” in the Republic of China, and the second one appeared together with contemporary discourses, such as “promoting ecological progress” and “reflection on modernity.” Although there are historical relationships between the two booms in their origins, their focuses vary greatly. In general, the former emphasized the practical value of natural history while the latter prioritized the spiritual significance of natural history; the former integrated the pursuit of both extensive and intensive knowledge of natural history while the latter pursued extensive knowledge of natural history and a broader audience among the public; the former featured the publication of primary books while the latter witnessed the flourishing of both primary books and books with more in-depth knowledge of nature. There are also similarities between the two. It should be noted that secondary natural history books are always marginalized. This is because people always pursue natural history with a utilitarian purpose. In the past, it was to popularize knowledge, and now it is to enhance ecological awareness and seek spiritual comfort. Since secondary books are research-oriented and rational, not very relevant to daily life, and slow to materially impact the public, it is hard for them to be coveted by publishers and readers. But as Liu emphasized, it is necessary to advance the primary and secondary research in parallel. Primary books help the public understand their surrounding natural environments and appreciate the “natural history spirit” through intimate “communications” with nature and to cultivate their interest in animals, plants, and insects. As their knowledge of, and their emotional attachments to, the environment grow, they will be able to reduce, or even rid, themselves of the “materialistic urban diseases” featuring materialism and seek “new sensibility” in the ecological sense. Secondary books help to highlight the value of traditional knowledge, local knowledge, and empirical knowledge from the perspective of historiography and are a rational summary and reflection of primary exploration (Liu, 2010). Embodying the permeation of the “natural history spirit” into life, “natural history +” books are also “newborns” published under the framework of the contemporary new natural history. This expands the topic scope and publication scale of natural history books, promising a brilliant prospect. To develop the natural history culture market, the publishing industry needs to adjust the publishing mix appropriately and balance the publication of the above-mentioned three types of books. In addition, during the adjustment, efforts should also be made to rectify the current issues facing the book market, such as similar topics and varied quality.

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