

Crows, Ducks, and *Gongsheng* 共生: *Literary Ethics of Coexistence*

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Chinese Ecoliterature and *Gongsheng*

- How does Chinese urban ecoliterature reflect *gòngshēng*?
- ***Gòngshēng*** → beyond biological symbiosis → mutual interdependence and ethical coexistence among all beings.
- Rooted in **Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist** traditions.
- **Contrasts with Western anthropocentrism**, overturns separation between “Nature” and “Humankind”.

Literary Corpus

- *China 2024 Ecoliterature Annual Selection* (中国2024生态文学年选), edited by Li Qingsong, published January 2025.
- 50+ essays exemplifying multispecies symbiotic narratives → **nonhumans as co-actors**.
- A shift in Chinese literature: from writing **about** nature to writing **with** nature.



Eco-Reverence and Non-Human Agency

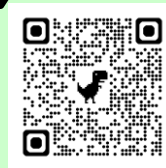
- Reverence for Nature (敬畏自然)
- Core value in contemporary Chinese ecoliterature
- Affirms nature's intrinsic worth and calls for ethical responsibility
- Traditionally: reverence toward Heaven (天命) or the Way (道)
- Since the 1990s: shifted focus toward Nature (自然) itself

*“We must hold **reverence in our hearts for nature**: not seek to conquer it, but to approach it, understand it, befriend it, and return to the embrace of Mother Earth. Many boastful people climb a small hill and declare ‘I have triumphed,’ but in truth, humanity will never triumph over nature” — Alai (阿来) (my translation)*

3 Foundations of Chinese Ecoliterature

- 天人合一: Humans and Heaven form one continuous whole.
 - 道法自然: Live in harmony with nature's self-generating order.
 - **Nonhuman Agency:** All beings, from wind to stone, have their own vitality and influence.
- Renewed urgency under 生态文明 (*Ecocivilization*), China's national eco-guiding vision since 2017.

Urban Coexistence in “The Birds of Beijing”

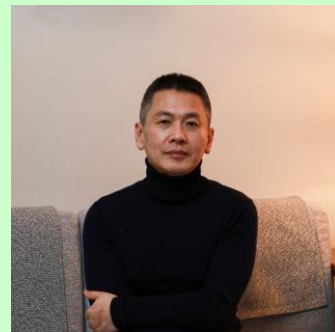


Link to
original essay

- 北京的鸟 Literary essay by **Wang Haibin** 王海兵, published in *Beijing Daily* (March 2024).
- Observes **urban birds** (esp. magpies and crows) as **co-inhabitants** of the city.

1 Urban Coexistence

- Magpies are “*evenly distributed throughout Beijing... found in any neighborhood or green space.*”
- Birds are not visitors but **permanent residents**, sharing human environments on equal terms.



Urban Coexistence in “The Birds of Beijing”

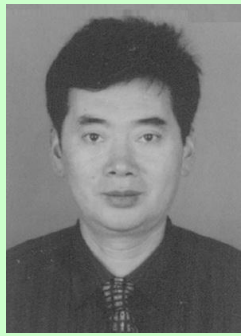
2 Coexistence through cultural memory

- **Manchu folklore:** crows **saved Nurhaci** (Qing dynasty).
- **Urban tolerance** toward crows → myth as eco-ethics.
- Smiling when hit by bird droppings → **acceptance of nonhuman agency**.

3 Shifts in Human–Bird Relations

- **Old Beijing pastime:** bird-keeping.
- **Today:** fewer “bird keepers,” yet more ecological attention
- From **possession** to **coexistence**, aligned with *gòngshēng* .

Active Care in “Releasing the Wild Ducks”



- Gao Guojing 高国镜's narrative 放归野鸭 explores the ethics of intervention — *gòngshēng* not as non-interference, but as caring participation.
- A couple cycling along the Chaobai River in **Beijing**.

1 The Ethical Dilemma

- The couple finds vulnerable ducklings, shivering and unable to fly.
- They hesitate: *Should they wait for the mother? Should they intervene?*
- After waiting, they **decide to take the ducklings home**.



Active Care in “Releasing the Wild Ducks”

2 Compassionate Engagement

- They observe the ducklings’ **natural affinity for water**.
- They develop **affective connection**: an enactment of **rén (仁)**, empathy beyond humans.

3 Ethical Humility and Return to Nature

- As the ducklings regain strength, the couple **questions their own actions**, showing **ethical humility** → **release them back**.
- The **mother duck returns**, validating the decision and restoring the natural cycle.

Active Care in “Releasing the Wild Ducks”

4 “Slow Ecology” (慢生态 *màn shēngtài*)

- Emphasizes **patient, attentive engagement** with the environment.
- *Gòngshēng* here means **balancing care with respect** for nonhuman autonomy.
- True coexistence requires **responsibility + humility**.

Comparative Analysis: 2 Approaches to *Gòngshēng*

- “*The Birds of Beijing*” (urban): humans as **observers/co-inhabitants**; ethic of tolerance/non-interference.
- “*Releasing the Wild Ducks*” (natural): humans as **temporary caretakers**; ethic of humble care.
- **Continuous** coexistence vs. **brief** intervention.
- Multispecies **urbanism** vs. restoration to the **wild**.
- **Gòngshēng**: a flexible ethic balancing restraint and responsibility.

Broader Implications: Literature as Ecological Pedagogy

- **Cultivates** empathy across species → nonhumans as agents with their own experiences.
- **Challenges** human exceptionalism → humans within (not above!) ecosystems.
- **Models** ecological citizenship through attentiveness, humility, and adaptability.

Gòngshēng as Urgent and Universal

- Modernity treats nature as resource; **Chinese ecoliterature offers an alternative vision.**
- Through observation, care, and restraint, **writers model coexistence over domination.**
- Coexistence begins with **noticing the beings** we share space with.
- In the age of climate crisis, **such literature nurtures reverence, humility, and interdependence.**

Thank you!