



The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China

Mark Elvin

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This is the first environmental history of China during the three thousand years for which there are written records. It is also a treasure trove of literary, political, aesthetic, scientific, and religious sources, which allow the reader direct access to the views and feelings of the Chinese people toward their environment and their landscape.

Elvin chronicles the spread of the Chinese style of farming that eliminated the habitat of the elephants that populated the country alongside much of its original wildlife; the destruction of most of the forests; the impact of war on the environmental transformation of the landscape; and the re-engineering of the countryside through water-control systems, some of gigantic size. He documents the histories of three contrasting localities within China to show how ecological dynamics defined the lives of the inhabitants. And he shows that China in the eighteenth century, on the eve of the modern era, was probably more environmentally degraded than northwestern Europe around this time.

Indispensable for its new perspective on long-term Chinese history and its explanation of the roots of China's present-day environmental crisis, this book opens a door into the Chinese past.

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