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A ‘Confucian’ Challenge to Global Environmentalism

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Half a century ago many Western intellectuals turned against Judeo-Christian values that were being postulated at that time as uncritically guiding Western societies towards the mastery of nature and eventually the destruction of a limited resource base. Prominent writers argued for a new vision,[1] while youth culture found inspiration in Asian philosophies. Today it would seem that this picture stands to be reversed. This essay outlines research that in fact points to a major challenge to global environmentalism, built since the 1960s, from authoritarian governance with ‘Confucian’-based approaches to the Man-Nature relationship. With China as its primary focus, the research identifies continuity between a range of popular and regime values including socio-centrism, the glorification of material wealth, and an inclination towards experiential approaches to nature. It is argued that, taken together, the combination of these values with historical authoritarianism, rising technological means of control and weak spiritual and civil societies puts China on a technocratic development path with little prospect of a decisive “environmental” turning point. Moreover, China’s global rise along this development trajectory increasingly impacts other countries, especially developing countries.

Environmental degradation in China is of a scale that Euro-American societies have never seen.[2] The country has reached a “choking point,” with 16 of the 20 most air polluted cities in the world and the entire Eastern China affected,[3] and with possibly one million premature deaths yearly. A recent Deutsche Bank report gloomily predicts that without aggressive reform measures Chinese coal consumption and increased car ownership will push pollution levels 70% higher by 2025.[4] The state of water shortages and water pollution in China are such that the World Bank warns of “catastrophic consequences for future generations.” Half of China’s population lacks safe drinking water and 90% of urban groundwater is contaminated. China’s major rivers are so polluted that large sections cannot even be used for farming. A third of China’s agricultural areas are impacted by acid rain. The rampant overuse of fertilizer and pesticides in cropland and the seeping of heavy metals (lead, arsenic,

and cadmium) from factories, smelters, and mines into the ground constantly threatens China’s food supply.

The limits of simple comparison

Critics of global capitalism would commonly argue that it is in the nature of that system to destroy the resource base. Classical modernization theory, on the other hand, may point to both rising middle class values and civil societies as long-term remedies for environmental abuse. I will contend that common visions of modernization neglect the historical and cultural differences in those crucial civil, popular, and religious values which guide public debate on resource exploitation and feed into environmental activism.



In particular, two aspects of China’s ‘Confucian’ legacy figure prominently in its present environmental record, one by default is the failure to consider nature in statecraft, another is visible in an undercurrent of popular cosmology that interacts with Confucian-based authority.[5] Despite its revolutionary modern history, China’s native value system still runs deep as a social undercurrent. This includes a radical socio-centrism in which the world that matters most consists of Chinese civilization.

At the same time, popular religion has a holistic outlook that sees man, nature and society as a unity, even as an experiential whole. Such metaphysical holism has been regarded as being protective of nature, yet it is very different from the epistemological holism of ecology. It tends to imply that nature is spontaneously self-generating in a constant transformation process, while man's relationship with nature is not essentially a moral issue: man and his activities belong to nature's own cyclical processes. Ethical extension is not encouraged, since every aspect of nature is subject to the same inherent dynamics of creation and recreation, and any given state of balance may be termed 'harmonious' if beneficial to man.

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Protests over pollution and health threats run into the thousands every month in China, yet environmental consciousness as such is weak, and major environmental NGOs still tend to be run with foreign funding. Cultural criticism, which was vital both before and after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, has in principle been monopolized by the Chinese party-state to fit its own modernization agenda and to keep Westernization at bay. By means of censorship and repression, intellectual and civil society actors are being driven towards compliance and often commercialization, while being barred from taking state institutions to court. This has stifled those processes, including a transformation of values that would normally be regarded as the prerequisite for an environmental turn.

Global environmentalism under threat

Given China's increasing global reach these problems at home inevitably spill over to practices abroad that affect environmental quality, particularly in relation to weak and developing states. Meanwhile, China's increasing challenge to Western economic, political, and discursive power certainly also extends to Western environmentalism. National and international development organizations, including NGOs, will thus have a harder time pushing an environmental agenda, and China's foreign policy will jeopardize effective sanctions.



China is in the spotlight for a growing range of global environmental issues. Its carbon dioxide emission levels are now at par with the EU on a per capita basis and rising exponentially. Chinese particulate pollution is causing alarm across Asia and beyond. As China’s own sea waters are increasingly polluted and depleted, the Chinese fishing fleet, the largest in the world, is increasing involved in illegal fishing in the waters of mainly developing countries and in fishing rights disputes with several countries. Chinese multinationals in the mining and oil extraction sectors are often seen to operate in defiance of rules and regulations, even inside national parks in African countries, while corruption is rampant among Chinese business managers in these areas. Illegal Chinese gold miners have poured into several African countries, extending practices that are already causing vast environmental destruction in Asia. Chinese companies are heavily engaged in illegal tropical hardwood logging in Southeast Asia and Africa to the extent that China is now by far the largest importer, consumer, and exporter of illegal timber. A long list of endangered species with importance for Chinese traditional medicine, including tiger, elephant, bear, rhinoceros and shark are being driven to extinction in many countries in Southeast Asia and Africa in part due to an insatiable and ready market

especially in China and Vietnam. The near open influx of illegal hardwood and animal substances into China is causing outrage among environmentalists across the world.[6] China controls a huge network of rivers originating on the Tibetan Plateau and supplying fresh water to nearly half of the world's population, yet, with dwindling and increasingly polluted water sources at home, China is also a central player in international regulation of fresh water sources while at the same time resisting many cooperative arrangements.

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In short, China is stepping up its global presence while making it clear that it will not play by rules set by the Western world. Which rules it will play by remains uncertain, but environmentally protective and sustainable practices appear structurally and ideologically constrained in the Chinese context.

It is worth remembering that China's recent history, in what may be termed its first modernity,[7] was dramatic and the population paid a high price for radical policy experimentation. If China continues on its environmentally insensitive path—itself a radical policy experiment—at the moment of its entry into a second modernity, it will have untold environmental implications both at home, in developing countries within China's reach, and globally. The present research, to be further developed into an international research framework, aims at translating such overarching issues into a series of localized case studies of environmental policy and practice implications also reaching beyond China, for instance in Southeast and Central Asia and in East and Central Africa.

Notes

[1] Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis'. *Science*, 10 March 1967, pp. 1203-07. http://www.theologylived.com/ecology/white_historical_roots.pdf
[2] Judith Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012.
[3] Thomas N. Thompson, 'Choking on China: The Superpower that is Poisoning the World'. *Foreign Affairs*, Features, 8 April 2013. http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139141/thomas-n-thompson/choking-on-china

Deutsche Bank Market Research, China, ‘Big Bang Measures to Fight Air Pollution’. 1 March 2013. http://www.fullermoney.com/content/2013-03-01/Deutsche_ChinaStrategy28Feb2013.pdf

[5] Ole Bruun, ‘When you have seen the Yellow Mountains: Approaches to Nature, Essence and Ecology in China. Forthcoming: *Worldviews*, DOI 10.1163/15685357-01700005.

[6] Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), ‘Environmental crime – putting the blame where it belongs.’ May 10, 2013. http://www.eia-international.org. http://www.eia-international.org/environmental-crime-putting-the-blame-where-it-belongs

[7] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New Delhi: Sage, 1992.

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