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China and the United States: A Yin-Yang Environmental Relationship

It was somewhere over the Arctic that I understood the relationship between iPads and the Tao Te Ching. Our plane, a Boeing 777, was stuffed, its hundreds of seats aglow with personal video screens. In the dim lights around me, people watched "Mean Girls," "Glee," and "Groundhog Day." Flight attendants served microwaved General Tso's chicken and hot tea in plastic cups.

Everyone seemed happy. And who could blame them? We were warm, and fed, and entertained. Every single head was plugged into an iPad, or an iPod, or an in-flight film, many with fancy noise-canceling headphones that prevented any unpleasantness from seeping in. In terms of time and space, we were perfectly suspended, perfectly cocooned, perfectly isolated from each other, and from the rest of the world. Our minds were perfectly, endlessly, distracted. We could have been anywhere.

Where we were, in fact, was directly over the North Pole, its ice cracked into valleys and ridges visible even from 30,000 feet. As far as I could tell, no one bothered to look.

I was on my way to China to share ideas about "environmental humanities" with colleagues and students at universities in Shanghai, Beijing, and Xiamen. I was anxious to see the country's mountains and rivers, soak up some images to go along with the poetry and spiritual verse I had nursed on for so long. Maybe, if I got lucky, I'd catch a glimpse of a hermit or a monk, someone who had opted out of China's go-for-broke economic explosion. Wisdom traditions ran deep in China, and I was curious to see how they were faring in a country that in recent years had placed all its chips on industrial development.

I have seen Buddhist monks wandering the roads of Thailand, their begging bowls out, offering passers-by a chance to manifest generos-

ity and compassion. The monks' silent, public poverty is a constant reminder of the spiritual possibilities of dissent. I knew such displays were unlikely in China. In all cultures, opting out implies cultural critique, and contemporary China is hardly known for coddling its critics.

Two thousand years ago, during China's Han dynasty, there were 1,300 Taoist masters in a country of fifty million people. Today there are a tenth that many masters, and the country's population is more than twenty times larger. During the Cultural Revolution, countless Taoist and Buddhist temples were looted or destroyed, and the last seventy years have been unrelentingly brutal for Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs. Economic development, industrial production, and the accumulation of wealth have become the new religion. To an American, this sounded awfully familiar.

Today, Chinese spiritual practices are monitored by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Though there may be signs of the state loosening its control—there are now some 5,000 Taoist temples in China, up from 1,500 in 1997—skeptics say some of this new tolerance comes from politicians interested more in tourist cash than spiritual attainment. Religious practice is fine as long as it keeps the money coming in.

And in China, to be sure, the money keeps pouring in. Virtually every device on our plane had been made in China, then shipped to the United States. Now, in a kind of perfect loop of global economics, the gadgets, and many of the people they were attached to, were coming home again. For my part, I put my Chinese-made headphones on my head and flipped on the film "Contagion," about an American tourist who goes to Asia and brings back a virus that spreads to the rest of the world.

Even before our plane landed in Shanghai, I could see the city's smog, and the ghastly color of the city's rivers, which looked chocolate brown even from 10,000 feet. Walking around the city, I discovered, the air pollution was so thick that—even in the middle of the day—I could look directly at the sun. The city's air was so bad, an American colleague said, it looked like London in 1850.

The World Bank recently reported that cancer became China's leading cause of death in 1997, and now causes some 700,000 premature

deaths a year—about one in five deaths, up 80 percent in thirty years. And air pollution is this bad *before* most Chinese have started driving cars.

In recent months, the American press has, once again, reported enthusiastically on China's growing environmental troubles. Twice in recent weeks, the *New York Times* has run stories covering the "sickening and dangerous" air pollution in Beijing and northern China, and praised what it sees as an uptick in Chinese media coverage of industrial pollution. A Twitter feed from the U.S. embassy, the *Times* reported, rated Beijing's air at "an astounding 755 on an air quality scale of 0 to 500." An American embassy employee called the pollution in Beijing "crazy bad."

The *Times* has also spilled a lot of ink chronicling the shifting Chinese labor force. Its reporting on poor working conditions prompted a bump in salary at the Foxconn plants that make Apple products; later, the paper reported that young, educated Chinese are beginning to turn their backs on factory work. Cranking out iPads for the world market, apparently, is no longer considered fulfilling work.

As welcome as reporting on Chinese environmental is—both in the American and Chinese press—there is something missing from this story that both Chinese and Americans might well remember: that a good deal of Chinese environmental problems are directly caused by boundless American consumption. Indeed, when it comes to both local and global pollution, China and the United States have a yin-yang relationship: China produces, America consumes. The two sides are deeply intertwined; neither could carry on the way they do without the other.

The United States, as Chinese rightfully (and regularly) points out, is in no position to cast stones. It's no secret that over the past thirty years, American industrial plants have closed down and been replaced by factories in China; in just the last decade, imports of Chinese consumer products nationwide have surged from $62 billion to $246 billion. Nearly 20 percent of the consumer products for sale in the country today are Chinese-made, compared to 5 percent in 1997. China now makes roughly 80 percent of the toys sold in the United States. If China exports products to the United States, in other words, what the United States exports to China is industrial pollution.

The sheer scale of industry is also a primary reason China is now

the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases. Nearly 40 percent of China's carbon dioxide output comes from the production of exported goods, the British journalist Jonathan Watt writes in *When a Billion Chinese Jump,* his devastating chronicle of Chinese environmental breakdown.

The effect of this on the Chinese mind is hard to estimate. In Shanghai, I heard a story about a remote Chinese mining town, where parents worried that their children had developed some sort of neurological trouble. Whenever their kids drew pictures of the sky, the parents reported, they colored it not blue, but gray. Was their something wrong with their children's optic nerves? With their brains? It took a magazine reporter to point out the obvious: There was nothing wrong with the children's eyesight. They were coloring the sky gray because they sky was gray.

Why is the Chinese sky so gray? In large part because Chinese factories keep feeding American big box stores. With so much industry having shifted from the United States to China, it's easy for Americans to think they have somehow escaped the problem of industrial pollution. China makes things cheap, and we like cheap. Chinese factories don't face the same regulatory requirements we have (or pretend to have) here. But there is a bitter irony here.

For starters, a startling number of the products shipped to the United States contain unregulated synthetic chemicals that cause cancer, neurological and developmental problems, and hormone disruption. Stories of these chemicals seeping into American shopping bags (and bodies) abound: pet food contaminated with melamine, a compound used in cleaning products; toothpaste mixed with diethylene glycol, a solvent typically found in antifreeze; 20 million toys recalled because they were painted with lead paint. Fewer than 3 percent of the 80,000 chemicals currently in use have ever been tested for carcinogenicity. Far fewer (or none) have been assessed for their effect on the human endocrine system or reproductive health. In other words, if the Chinese are at risk because of pollution caused by industrial production, Americans are at risk because they consume these very same products.

At least as pressing, from a global environmental perspective, is that China's growing consumer class aspires to live with the same level of material wealth as Americans, a trend that has dire consequences indeed. Although they represent just 5 percent of the global popula-

tion, Americans consume some 25 percent of the world's energy resources, a gluttony that is not sustainable and is clearly not worth imitating. If the world can't even afford to have Americans consuming the way they do, it certainly can't afford to have Chinese consuming like Americans. As China burns through its own natural bounty, it has begun harvesting the world's: the country recently overtook the World Bank as the single biggest investor in Africa, and its mission on that continent is not humanitarian.

In this, of course, China resembles every other colonial power, including the United States. And China's American-style consumer demand is just beginning to build. State planners in China estimate that half the country's population—some 600 million people—will have entered the middle class by 2020. In Chinese cities, at least, the American brand of consumption is on full display. Beijing's streets, navigated until ten years ago by legions of bicyclists, are now choked by single-passenger cars—and again, the Chinese, demographically speaking, haven't really even started driving. Shanghai's 23 million citizens already consume 70 percent more than the rest of the country, and create more carbon per capita than people in Britain. Sitting in a bar atop one of Shanghai's tallest buildings and looking out over the limitless evening cityscape, I struggled for comparable scale. Then it hit me: Shanghai has buildings the size of those in New York, lit up like those in Las Vegas, covering a footprint the size of Los Angeles.

A few facts from my notebook: Kentucky Fried Chicken, an anomaly when its first store opened in China in 1987, had 2,000 outlets and 200,000 employees twenty years later. China's Apple stores sold two million iPhone 5's in a single weekend. Shanghai's airport has 226 gates. From the pedestrian shopping malls in a university town like Xiamen to the skyscraper-sized neon billboards in Shanghai, it's hard to imagine just where in Marx's imagination this Communist country would fit.

"The problem," one of my Chinese colleagues told me, "is that American consumers have set us a very bad example."

So here we are, two countries feeding each other's addictions. Is there a way out? China's central government has mandated that the country's economy must continue to grow by at least 8 percent a year—down from 11 percent, but ecologically insane nonetheless. What to do?

As I traveled around China, I asked my academic peers what wisdom, if any, classical Chinese philosophy might offer the country—and the world—to help address our shared environmental challenges. Modern China has shown the world a new standard for industrial hunger. Might the seeds of environmental healing be found in its own magnificent wisdom traditions?

Over and over, I was told, these traditions were considered officially irrelevant; modern environmental troubles absolutely required modern, technocratic, resource management. The central government's argument is clear: China is in the midst of an unprecedented economic transformation; the economy depends on raw materials; "nature" is the source of this raw material, and thus requires sound management. The "environment," as such, is a source of economic growth, and nothing more.

There have been some odd developments on this front, some of which indicate the foolishness of "managing" land without attendant ecological wisdom. Since the beginning of the new millennium, China has increased its forest cover by some 11,500 square miles, a chunk of land about the size of Massachusetts. In addition, in a decades-long project designed to combat desertification, the country is planting 90 million trees along a 2,800-mile stretch known as the "Great Green Wall." Millions of seedlings have been planted by hand, millions more seeds have been dropped by airplane.

As encouraging as these efforts sound, scientists have discovered a number of problems. Most of the trees in the reforestation efforts are non-native, and quickly perish for lack of water in the dry climate. Equally troubling, the new tracts are more like monoculture tree farms than actual forests; they lack biodiversity, and do little to restore healthy ecosystems. And the "Great Green Wall"? Some 85 percent of the plantings have failed. Jiang Goaming, an ecologist at the Chinese Academy of Science, has called the project "a fairy tale."

Surely, I asked my colleagues, there must be a more balanced approach? There are few traditions wiser on the balance between humans and nature than China's own. What of Buddhism? What of Taoism? Was there room in contemporary China to consider viewing the country's natural systems as something more than a warehouse of raw materials, waiting their turn on the industrial conveyor belt? Were there lessons China might learn from the American record, riddled as it is

with industrial rapaciousness, spiritual malaise and environmental collapse? Clearly, the countries' ills are related, mutually dependent, and mutually reinforcing. Is there a way to imagine a different kind of yin-yang relationship between the two, one that nurtures and shares wisdom rather than just a global assembly line?

Traditional Chinese culture has long been deeply engaged with the spiritual resonance of wilderness; mountains and rivers were "places where divine immortals keep moving in and out," the Tang Emperor Taizong wrote in a prayer in 645 BCE. From the Tang dynasty onward, people of all classes made pilgrimages to temples on sacred mountains. Chinese poetry, landscape painting, and formal gardens—rich with the rivers, mountains and valleys—are all designed to evoke and inspire reverence for the elegance and power of the natural world. The Chinese contemplative tradition "doesn't represent a renunciation of society so much as a renunciation of greed," Bill Porter writes in *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits.* "As a rule, hermits sought to reform society by first reforming themselves." Rediscovering meaning, and the modesty, deference, and contentment that goes along with it, would surely go a long way in curbing our collective appetite for consumer goods, which—it doesn't take a Taoist to tell us—end up being poor substitutes for genuine happiness. The endless pursuit of the flashy and the new does nothing to relieve the feeling that we are "hungry ghosts," wandering the world desperately searching for ways to fill our spiritual void.

> Putting a value on status
> will cause people to compete
> Hoarding treasure
> will turn them into thieves
> Showing off possessions
> will disturb their daily lives
>
> Thus the sage rules
> by stilling minds and opening hearts
> by filling bellies and strengthening bones
> He shows people how to be simple
> and live without desires (Tao Te Ching, Verse 3)

One of the most penetrating concepts in Taoism is the notion of "wuwei," a beautifully ambiguous term that implies a kind of "non-doing": when considering the proper way to behave, *wuwei* recommends the kind of moderation and restraint that leads to self-mastery. This kind of non-action is the opposite of passivity: it is actively choosing not to act, or to act with discernment, and grace, rather than impulsiveness and greed. Importantly, it implies acting in a way that causes fewer undesirable consequences, for ourselves and the world around us. Plainly, ignorance of this idea has demonstrated one thing clearly: just as people can become addicted to impulsive, self-destructive habits, so can national and global economies.

"What induces ecological problems are just the most prevailing trends: industrialization and commercialization or global capitalism," writes Liu Xiaogan, a Chinese Taoism scholar. "Prosperity rests on high consumption that stimulates human desire for biological enjoyment and for the satisfaction of vanity."

Attention to the mind's ceaseless desires is a central concern of Buddhism, which arrived from India in the first century BCE. By this time China was already massively deforested, its trees cut down to make room for cultivated paddies and fields. To Taoism's reverence for the mysterious wisdom of nature, Buddhism added an entirely fresh vision: that *all* things, and not just human beings, are imbued with "Buddha-nature." Rocks, trees, streams, mountains—everything shares the same Buddha-nature as the human mind. The tradition brims over with instructive metaphor.

"Suppose there is a pool of water, turbid, stirred up and muddied," the Buddha taught. "Just so a turbid mind. Suppose there is a pool of water, pure, tranquil, and unstirred, where a man can see oysters and shells, pebbles and gravel. Just so an untroubled mind."

Beyond this, of course, Buddhism revealed two notions with rich resonance in ecological thinking: the eternal (if subtle) interdependence of all things, and the irrefutable (if subtle) laws of cause-and-effect. If a butterfly flaps its wings in China, it affects the weather in Central Park. If the skies in China are gray, you will find endocrine disruptors in cosmetics in Cleveland.

As we have forgotten these truths, so have we suffered. Powerful industries and technological expansion have "caused a split in (our) minds regarding the unity between humans and nature, causing people

to think that nature can be treated as subservient to the willful desires of humans and that nature would never respond negatively to these conditions," writes Zhang Jiyu, vice president of the Chinese Daoist Association and a sixty-fifth-generation direct descendant of the founder of Taoist religion. "Daoists believe that this inflated image of the self is an important cause of the serious ecological crisis confronting the modern world."

It's not just the environment that has withered in all this, of course. As they push into the middle class, Chinese people recognize the price of serving as America's industrial labor force, and are starting to want out. "I have never and will never consider a factory job," Wang Zengsong, a twenty-five-year-old college graduate recently told the *Times*. What's the point of sitting there hour after hour, doing repetitive work?"

This rings a bell. Writing 2,300 years ago, the foundational Taoist thinker Chuang Tzu wondered at the wisdom of a man who spends his life "sweating and laboring to the end of his days and never seeing his accomplishment, merely exhausting himself and never knowing where to look for rest. 'I'm not dead yet!' he says—but what good is that?"

Better, Chuang Tzu says, to follow the example of Cook Ting, a butcher so skilled in the use of his blade that he has not had to sharpen it in nineteen years. Cook Ting has become so skilled he moves without effort, without thought, his knife—now a powerful metaphor—goes through the ox without touching a single bone, following things "as they are."

"Whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—flop!—the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."

In today's China, of course, any transmission of wisdom is impeded by distressing structural barriers. Riding on a crowded ferry back from class in Xiamen, a city directly across the water from Taiwan, I struck up a conversation with a Chinese graduate student, who said two forces stood in the way of Chinese progress: the country's explod-

ing disparity in wealth, and the government's relentless censorship of the Internet. The two problems are related, he said: The government monitors social networks so people can't talk about how much money the ruling classes are stealing from the rest of the country.

This was just days after I had arrived in Xiamen, and it coincided with the very height of the Bo Xilai scandal. Bo was a national political star who had just been arrested—and then disappeared—for his (and his wife's) involvement in the murder of a British businessman. The story became an international sensation, not because of the violence but because of stories about Bo's personal fortune, which, it turned out, reached into the hundreds of millions of dollars. (Not long after this, *The New York Times* published stories about the billions secretly accumulated by the prime minister's family.)

The fact that many of the senior officials implicated in these scandals have direct ties to the country's biggest state-run industries was not lost on the Xiamen student. And sure enough, back in my hotel room, I discovered a whole list of Bo-related terms blocked from a basic Google search: in China, it wasn't just Bo Xilai the person who had disappeared from pubic view, it was any trace that he had ever existed.

And if you think Bo Xilai is off limits to public discourse, try mentioning Tibet. China is a country where showing a photograph of the Dalai Lama will get you arrested, where some one hundred monks have set themselves on fire in a desperate plea for recognition from the international community. Suggesting that Tibetan Buddhism might have something to offer China in its current predicament, in other words, is pure folly.

And yet there it is: a grand wisdom tradition, right in the (aggressively annexed) neighborhood, offering a rich alternative to blind production and consumption. Sogyal Rinpoche, in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, suggests that consumption is symptomatic of cultures—in both the East and the West—that no longer contemplate the consequences of their behavior, either in time or space. His diagnosis? Obsessive consumption is a manifestation of the fear of death.

"I have come to realize that the disastrous effects of the denial of death go far beyond the individual: They affect the whole planet," he writes. "Believing fundamentally that this life is the only one, modern people have developed no long-term vision. So there is nothing to restrain them from plundering the planet for their own immediate ends

and from living in a selfish way that could prove fatal for the future.

"How many more warnings do we need, like this one from the former Brazilian Minister for the Environment, responsible for the Amazon rain forest? 'Modern industrial society is a fanatical religion. We are demolishing, poisoning, destroying all life-systems on the planet. We are signing IOUs our children will not be able to pay. We are acting as if we were the last generation on the planet. Without a radical change in heart, in vision, the earth will end up like Venus, charred and dead.'"

These are clearly not words the Chinese government is anxious for its people to hear. To someone raised in a culture of free-flowing information, the damming of information felt as ominous as the damming of a river. Something about the government's desperate effort to control social communication struck me as emblematic of a culture choking itself off from its own potential for healing. The unfettered and democratic movement of information, rather than an obsession with shopping, might be a more appropriate model for the United States to offer China.

We could consider it payback. Although it has been imperfectly absorbed, China's wisdom has already been offered to us. In the United States, the very underpinnings of some of our richest environmental philosophy come from Asia: Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Muir, each had an abiding interest in Asian philosophy, particularly Buddhism. This tradition has deepened over the years, with significant contributions from writers like Gary Snyder, Peter Matthiessen, Joan Halifax, Joanna Macy, and many others.

If Taoism has had a less visible impact on this side of the globe, perhaps (as any Taoist would appreciate) it is only because the influence has not been named as such. Surely Chuang Tzu's exhortation that we seek labor that serves as a source of pride, traditional skills, and spiritual meaning vibrates through the work of Wendell Berry. And the systemic, deeply contextual impulses of Lao Tzu have ecological resonances that took firm root in the work of Aldo Leopold. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community," Leopold writes. "It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

The Taoist spirit is richly articulated in Leopold's notion of the land ethic, in which the human impulse for insight, compassion, and justice

is extended to both nonhuman creatures and ecological systems writ large. Land is not merely soil, Leopold writes, it is "a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals." Indeed, Leopold's (and Muir's) resistance to the "forest management" policies of people like Gifford Pinchot parallel the Taoist response to Confucianism: nature has meaning, and value, beyond what it can provide the commercial marketplace.

Leopold's words helped usher in an era of American environmental consciousness that we are still working to fulfill. Like China, we ignore such ideas at our peril. In the nineteenth century, Jonathan Watts writes, "Britain taught the world how to produce. In the twentieth, the U.S. taught us how to consume. If China is to lead the world in the twenty-first century, it must teach us how to *sustain.*"

There are signs of new thinking on this, it turns out, and like much good new thinking, it is fueled by the rediscovery of what has always been there. The future for both countries may rest on how seriously we wrestle with our own sustaining traditions, and how much we can learn from each other. Because if consumer goods can circulate the globe, so, theoretically, can wisdom.

One of the last conversations I had in Xiamen was with a young student who had become fed up with watching the hills around her hometown being ripped apart to make room for more condominiums. When I asked her what the future held for the environment around a town that bills itself as "China's most livable city," the student smiled, reached into her pocket, and pulled out an iPhone. She showed me an image of a poster she had made, with a map of the city. There were pins in place where people could go if they wanted to see a bird.