Article

What Is the Path to Ecological Civilization?

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The book *Ecological Civilization* examines how traditional belief systems from China can help facilitate a sustainable future

In many ways, the political and economic forces that have led to the decline of traditional belief systems are also implicated in the destruction of the environment. How, then, could Indigenous and traditional faiths play a role in trying to preserve the natural world? China, with the second largest economy in the world, joins the United States in being one of the primary contributors to the climate change crisis.

On June 16, 2015, the International Conference on Ecological Civilization and Ecological Reporting was held at the Yale Center in Beijing to continue the dialogue on faith, climate change, economic growth, and China's place in the current geopolitical balance of power. That same year, Pope Francis traveled to Washington D.C. to urge the United States government to take action to save the environment.

> ***Is the Chinese government's language on "ecological civilization" just rhetoric, a gauzy distraction from the***

> ***grim statistics on pollution and regulatory indifference and a lengthening list of restrictions on non-government organizations? … If that is your presumption you will be surprised by the proceedings of this conference. Within China, you will see, there are as many views on environmental issues—and sources of inspiration—as in the United States or Europe or beyond.***
>
> ***—Jon Sawyer, "Introduction"* Ecological Civilization**

What Is Ecological Civilization?

The concept of ecological civilization points to a fully sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world, one that would require a massive restructuring of human life based on ecological principles. As the global debate about the climate change crisis has intensified, references to the concept of ecological civilization have also increased.

The Tragic Path toward Ecological Civilization

As discussed during the 2015 conference at the Yale Center, ecological civilization has deep roots in ancient belief systems that were dismissed by major powers in the name of industrial modernity. Now that the crisis of global climate change is becoming undeniable, these same major powers are revisiting the idea of sustainability they had formerly abandoned. The historical path to this realization was a tragic and violent one.

Power Politics and Conquest over Nature

The destruction of our environment is directly connected to the clash of European powers that sought to dominate the global economy in the 19th and 20th centuries. As major industrial nations fought to determine who would control the global economy, the race towards industrial and military supremacy dramatically outpaced concerns about the sustainability of life on the planet. Ultimately, this culminated in the two world wars, and then the Cold War in which formerly agrarian societies like China and Russia sought to compete with Western imperialism through communist systems. In this competition for economic dominance, millions of lives were lost or locked into evolving systems of exploitation, and vast swathes of the environment were plundered. In the name of industrial modernity, colonizing powers sought to discredit, co-opt, or destroy the Indigenous belief systems of their colonial subjects, forcing them to either conform to major state-sanctioned religions or reject spirituality altogether.

For the post-World War II Chinese government, competing in these Great Power Wars involved destroying Chinese folk religions and rooting out Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist cultural influences. The brutal occupation of China by Japan had a profound effect on the growth of Chinese nationalism, giving the Communist Party in China cause to motivate people around their own political programs. But, like other major powers during this period, China saw traditional religions as an impediment to national industrial greatness. It sought to impose a secular nationalist identity that would help the country compete with Europe and the United States in the ongoing war for global economic power. But toward the end of the 20th century, these trends began to change.

Shēngtài Wénmíng in the Aftermath of Great Power Wars

The term “ecological civilization” was first coined by two experts from the Soviet Union in 1984. By that time, the Cold War and the world’s most destructive century was winding to its conclusion. A few years later, scientists and environmentalists began to articulate the Chinese vision of ecological civilization (*shēngtài wénmíng*). Like other countries China was beginning to challenge (or at least qualify) the violent “conquest over nature” ideology first championed by Europe during the height of the Industrial Revolution. In 2012, the Chinese Communist Party officially introduced ecological civilzation into its constitution and Xi Jinping incorporated it into the Party Charter in 2017.

In recent years, climate change has become undeniable—and so, too, has the evidence that government policies and corporate exploitation have played a major role. In 2017, for instance, *New York Times* reporters found that Exxon Mobil had actively suppressed the truth about the impact of fossil fuels on the environment to protect the growing profits of their empire. In the wake of wildfires that have spread throughout Canada and the United States, and dams that have destroyed ecosystems in the American West, government officials are now turning to Native Americans and First Nations for strategies to manage these ecological crises. The very Indigenous wisdom to which America and Canada are turning to mitigate climate emergencies is the same wisdom they tried to eradicate through physical and cultural genocide.

Like the West, China is coming to terms with its own past of cultural cleansing in the name of industrial progress. As Pulitzer Center grantees Shi Lihong and Gary Marcuse observe in their October 14, article, once-maligned folk traditions are suddenly being reconsidered as essential parts of new environmental policies.

> ***The Communist Party's appeal for help comes at a time when millions of Chinese are returning to traditional faiths, and to temples and monasteries that were once banned. Only 40 years ago China was convulsed by a cultural revolution that defaced or destroyed symbols of religious faith across the country.***
>
> ***—Shi Lihong and Gary Marcuse, "Can Chinese Culture Save China's Environment?"***

In the fullest sense, however, the challenge of building an ecological civilization is not just about hastily cleaning up the havoc wreaked on the natural world during the 19th and 20th centuries just to begin the process of destruction all over again. It also requires a responsibility to the peoples who were sidelined as impediments to progress. As Wang Lihua of Nankai University said during the 2015 conference:

> ***I think that true harmony between humankind and nature depends on harmony within society itself. Social justice is fundamental to achieving the harmony between humankind and nature we seek. This is true not only within a social group but also among countries.***
>
> ***—Wang Lihua***

From Conquest over Nature to Ecological Civilization: Is It possible?



Source: Nathan Cima via Unsplash.

> ***"Ecological civilization" will address China's environmental challenges, they pledge, in part by invoking the religious and cultural touchstones that have informed Chinese society for millennia—traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism that had been officially suppressed during seven decades of Communist***

> ***Party rule.***
>
> ***—Jon Sawyer, "Introduction", Ecological Civilization***

The proceedings of the International Conference on Ecological Civilization and Environmental Reporting are compiled in *Ecological Civilization,* an ebook published by the Pulitzer Center. The book contains a wide range of ideas from journalists, scholars, religious thinkers, policy analysts, and nonprofit leaders with expertise in China's unique environmental challenges. Each of the book's nine chapters illuminates a different aspect of the journey toward a sustainable future. More broadly, these proceedings grapple with the question of whether it is too late altogether – that is, is it too late to revive the Indigenous traditions that were destroyed in the name of modernity? Can the denizens of Earth ever move beyond the narrow imperialist visions that have pushed the planet so perilously close to destruction?

Note: The International Conference on Ecological Civilization and Environmental Journalism was co-sponsored by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, the Communication University of China, and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies with the help of funding from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Read the book *Ecological Civilization* below:

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