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*Art,
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Nature, Sustainability and Ethics in Chinese Contexts

Angelika C. Messner

The main goal ...

of our class on “Nature and environment in China,” winter semester 2013/14, was to explore early Chinese notions of nature and the environment, reading and situating them in a geographical and historical context.

Putting these ideas in relation to their significance within general scholarly reasoning in ancient Chinese contexts, we came across the notion of “water” (*shui* 水), which was most widely used by scholars, poets and officials as a mental and cognitive tool for reasoning and arguing in political debates. We encountered several contexts in which “all life is constituted of *qi* 氣” (the material force or psychophysical process and transformation that connects all life systems – mineral, vegetable, animal and human). This cosmology points to ecological human-earth relations. Confucianism, Daoism as well as Buddhism have much to contribute to the question of how we should relate to our environment.

However, we also dealt with present-day situations ...

of current social and economic dynamics on a global scale. We know that these dynamics require that, more than ever before, we focus on relational conditions. There is a profound need to reflect on the role of relationships between individuals and between nature and the environment. Furthermore, we realize that nature and the environment have never been just the opposites of culture. Nature is intrinsically related to political and economic issues. As such, nature is a social category. Global governance means much more than just coordinating knowledge and related solutions to global environmental problems, but rather agreeing on a definition of the problem in the first place. It does not suffice to simply think about distributing knowledge to those who “lack this knowledge.” This has been demonstrated very clearly by debates about global warming at the United Nations Conferences on Environment and Development (UNCED) from the 1990s onwards, and at in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. These debates show that knowledge and related politics are situated in time and space, and that any knowledge regarding “global warming and sustainability issues” is being structured and challenged by the oppositions and alliances between the developed, industrialized nations and the less-developed industrialized nations.

111 See Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Early Confucianism and Environmental Ethics,” in: *Confucianism and Ecology*; ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 59–76.

China, until two decades ago, was not part of the industrialized developed countries. Yet rapid economic change catapulted China towards a highly developed country. Because of this, today’s China is as much a highly-developed and volatile country as it is underdeveloped. The Chinese experiment with free-market economics affects the middle classes and their preferences towards consumerism and housing, fostering increased automobile use and changed transportation patterns, thereby causing enormous environmental strain. This is why China plays such a significant role in current discussions regarding the nature and definitions of “sustainability.”

The concept of “sustainability” was first introduced by Hans Karl von Carlowitz (1645–1714) in his *Silvicultura economica*. As such, it is historically rooted in German early 18th century forestry discourses. Yet the danger of exploiting natural resources was not exclusively reflected in European contexts. Ancient Chinese texts also addressed these concerns.

Today, sustainability refers to somewhat more than just environmental protection: there are social and historical issues, as well as political and economic perspectives, that address the need to recognize the impact of the built environment on natural processes.

China is also aware of these problems. Yet the country also claimed the right to first economically develop and produce in aggressive ways, with environmental and natural protection as a second step. This changed somewhat in 2012, when Premier Wen Jiabao expressed the need for a green and prosperous world. Addressing China’s massive contribution to climate change, China now wants to help strengthen ecological protection. This commitment signals a shift in responsibilities and a shift in global power relations, with China at the center of these shifts. Such changes to power relations are simultaneously reflected in the domain of China’s academic performance. With this, previous patterns of inferiority and superiority in terms of scientific knowledge need to be adjusted in concrete terms: Chinese academics expect a dialogue on “eye-level” – a cooperation between equals. Cooperative partnership between China and Europe in the area

[2] See Marina Timoteo (ed.), *Environmental Law in Action: EU and China Perspectives* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2012); Lucia Serena Rossi and Giacomo DiFederico (eds.), *Fundamental rights in Europe and China. Regional identities and Universalism* (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, 2013). The following ideas about the meaning of “sustainability” in Chinese contexts are taken from these contributions.

[3] See Paul G. Harris, *Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development in China, Hong Kong in Global Context* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012).

of clean energy started in the 1990s. This partnership is underpinned by a number of multi-annual cooperation programs.’ However, the key findings of the completed projects show low delivery and low political impact in Beijing. The indication is that in order to efficiently combat climate change, we must make sure that we have a mutual (cultural) understanding of what we expect from the tools we are using. This has not always been the case between China and Europe. By now it is clear that sustainability is by no means a self-explanatory term; it includes social and historical issues as much as political and economic perspectives. This is why the importance of sustainability differs between communities and localities, and why it is inseparable from the oppositions and alliances between developed industrialized nations and less-developed nations.’

What does the word “sustainability” mean in present-day Chinese? The term reached China as part of huge reforms in the late 1970s, when China moved to the core of global world dynamics. Using the technique of semantic loans, the concept has been translated into Chinese as *kechixufazhan* 可持續發展. The second part of this word, the compound *fazhan* 發展 refers, to “development,” while the first part translates as “sustainable.” It is made of the three characters *ke chixu* 可持續, and literally means “that can be continued.”

A greater emphasis is given to the (Chinese) idea of ongoing development. Thus, the Chinese term denoting sustainability (*kechixufazhan* 可持續發展) expresses the intrinsic ambiguity of the Chinese concept of sustainability, denoting the dilemma of China, where rapid economic growth has gone hand in hand with an immense rise in environmental degradation.

The eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2006–2010) reflected on this situation: the plan introduced concern for the issue of climate change, *qihou bianhua* 氣候變化. Chapter 26, section 2 (development and utilization of climate resources), claims “to strengthen monitoring, prediction and assessment of anthropogenic influence on climate change.” This statement is intrinsically intertwined with the new concept of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和諧社會),

a motto issued by the Chinese government in 2005. While “harmonious society” aimed to balance social and environmental problems in the country, economic development remained the overriding priority. The Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011–2015) promotes the government’s focus on “inclusive growth,” or ensuring that the benefits of economic growth spread to a greater proportion of Chinese citizens. With this, the basic Chinese dilemma of rapid growth and environmental degradation is still there, even now as China is tolerating and encouraging a growing number of watchdog groups and NGOs. Another term important to current discussions is *huanjing* 環境 (environment). Protection of the environment is referred to as *huanjing bao-hu* 环境保护 and environmental pollution is called *huanjing wuran* 环境污染. These semantic fields, including the term for “sustainability,” were coined in the late 1970s when China started to become an important part of the global dynamics. Recently, China recognized the need to actively deal with the topic of “climate change” (*qihou bianhua* 氣候變化), as stated in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2006–2010). Accordingly, the terms social sustainability (*shehui kechi xuxing* 社會可持續性) and ecological sustainability (*shengtai kechi xuxing* 生態可持續性) are discussed by philosophers and historians who insist on indigenous Chinese ideas of sustainability that go back to 300 BC (Zhuang Zhou and Mencius are quoted extensively).¹ With this, the idea that the “sustainability concept” comes only from from Europe (e.g. Carlowitz in early 18th century Germany) comes into question.

At the same time, observers highlight the role of China in the current development of clean energy technology: while the EU has invested an annual 1.1 billion euros in private and government research (between 2007 and 2013), China’s government is reported to have spent about 2.7 billion euros in the same period. At the 2013 Climate Change Conference in Warsaw, Jiang Kejun, director at the Energy Research Institute in China, actually stated that China will contribute to cleaner growth. With these words, China has proclaimed its new role as the world’s largest consumer of clean energy,

[4] See Xinyan Jian (ed.), *The Examined Life – Chinese Perspectives – Essays on Chinese Ethical Traditions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[5] The *Wu Xing* (五行 *wǔ xíng*) also known as the Five Elements, Five Phases, the Five Agents, the Five Movements, Five Processes and the Five Steps/Stages, is a fivefold conceptual scheme that many traditional Chinese fields used to explain a wide array of phenomena, from cosmic cycles to the interaction between internal organs, and from the succession of political regimes to the properties of medicinal drugs. The “Five Phases” are Wood (木 *mù*), Fire (火 *huǒ*), Earth (土 *tǔ*), Metal (金 *jīn*), and Water (水 *shuǐ*).

and also as the biggest manufacturer of renewable energy technologies. For China, the global transition to low-carbon economic growth is therefore not primarily a burden, but rather a race to exploit the massive opportunities created by new markets at home and overseas. And, unless the results of the major closed EU research and cooperation projects show low delivery and low political impact, the EU has much to gain from cooperation with China, especially considering that, by 2015, China will have larger market and innovation support than the EU in renewable energy.

Finally: Historical Semantics ...

Basically, we were convinced throughout that the study of the Chinese historical semantics of “nature” and “environment” is a prerequisite for further dealing with current Chinese perspectives on nature and environment. In order to deepen our understanding of present developments, we introduced and discussed the lexicon around *qi* 氣 and *ziran* 自然 (nature) as well as *Wu Xing* 五行 (Five Phases)¹ and *wanwu* 万物 (ten thousand things under heaven). The continuous presence of the idea of *qi* 氣 in Chinese philosophy as a way of conceptualizing the basic structure of the cosmos, signifies a refusal to separate spirit and matter as two different entities. Furthermore, we introduced the term *ying* 應 (response), which entered the Confucian ethical lexicon as early as ancient times. *Ying* was a crucial aspect of sagehood, and referred to the spiritual ability to comprehend and respond spontaneously to things and adapt to the benefit of all concerned. Early Chinese models of the world referred to a “psychophysical” structure that functioned in an ordered harmony. Furthermore, our students (all from China, Europe and America) were invited to discover the Chinese world of painting and arts in history. To me, the class with students and professors from Muthesius Academy of Fine Arts and Design was a special challenge and an extraordinary experience that I would not want to miss for the world.