

How Confucianism Could Curb Global Warming

By James Miller – Fri Jun 26, 5:00 am ET

Kingston, Ontario – Now here's a curveball to secular Western policy experts: China's intellectuals are openly debating the role of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in promoting the Communist Party's vision of a harmonious society and ecologically sustainable economic development.

Nowhere is the question of what to do about the environment more vital than in China, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases – especially because scientists agree that climate change disproportionately affects the poor and the disenfranchised and that climate change will affect future generations far more than the present.

Yet the general impression of China's role in issues relating to environment is one of foot-dragging because it hasn't bought into a Western model to address it.

But Pan Yue, China's vice minister for environmental protection, is calling for China to capitalize on traditional Chinese religions in promoting ecological sustainability.

He says, "One of the core principles of traditional Chinese culture is that of harmony between humans and nature. Different philosophies all emphasize the political wisdom of a balanced environment. Whether it is the Confucian idea of humans and nature becoming one, the Taoist view of the Tao reflecting nature, or the Buddhist belief that all living things are equal, Chinese philosophy has helped our culture to survive for thousands of years. It can be a powerful weapon in preventing an environmental crisis and building a harmonious society."

And this just might work.

As The New York Times recently reported, China is in the midst of a transformation to cleaner forms of energy.

Although much of China's energy needs are still met by inefficient, coal-fired power stations with poor track records in terms of emissions, China has begun to invest heavily in cleaner coal technology in an effort to improve efficiency and reduce emissions.

Because of this, the International Energy Agency reduced its estimate of the increase in Chinese emissions of global warming gases from 3.2 percent to 3 percent even as the same agency raised its estimate of China's economic growth. China is managing to increase its economic output at a greater rate than its emissions.

This is good news for everyone.

But buried innocuously in the middle of this report was the startlingly frank statement of Cao Peixi, president of the China Huaneng group, China's largest state-owned electric company.

When asked about his company's decision to invest in more expensive but cleaner technology he replied: "We shouldn't look at this project from a purely financial perspective. It represents the future."

The \$64,000 question facing economists and politicians across the world is how to make decisions that take into account the big picture beyond the "purely financial perspective."

This is a hard question for Western economic and political theorists to answer, because their theories are based on the Enlightenment view of the self as an autonomous, rational individual.

But how are we to make decisions that take into account the interests of those who have not yet been born?

Being respectful to the interests of past and future generations is key to the Confucian view of the self and groups. To the question, "Who am I?" the Confucian answers, "I am the child of my parents and the parent of my children."

Confucianism begins from the proposition that human beings are defined by kinship networks that span the centuries. From this perspective the interests of the individual are bound up with the interests of the kinship group as it extends forward and backward across the generations.

This will be a key factor in the way China handles present and future environmental issues.

Consider the views of Jiang Qing, a leading Confucian intellectual. According to a recent report by Daniel Bell, a political theorist at China's Tsinghua University, Mr. Jiang proposes a political system that can take into account the interests of those who are typically ignored in modern democracies, such as foreigners, future generations, and ancestors.

"Is democracy really the best way to protect future victims of global warming?" he asks.

As China assumes a greater leadership role on the world stage, we can expect the emergence of a variety of models of sustainable development rooted in a plurality of cultural traditions, including Confucianism.

The time when Westernization was the only credible model of development is over.

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