

REPORT

Eco-socialism and ‘Ecological Civilization’ in China

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On the weekend of May 16-18, 2008, Shandong University in Jinan, the capital of the province just south of Beijing, hosted an International Conference on Environmental Politics. The university is one of the oldest in modern China and has three lush green city campuses. The dynamo behind the event was Professor Qingzhi Huan with strong support from university president, Prof. Tao Zhan, and an enthusiastic postgrad team. It opened with formalities from Prof. Mouchang Yu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Quanxin Zhang, Vice-Director of the Shandong Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and Yaoxian Wang, former Director of the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Speakers from far afield included Indian-born activist Saral Sarkar from Cologne—author of *Eco-socialism or Eco-capitalism?*; political philosopher John Barry from Queens University, Belfast; environmental sociologists, Seajae Lee, Jaemook Park, and Do-Wan Ku from Korea; Masatsugu Maruyama from Japan, and myself from the University of Sydney.

The two-day forum was loosely organized under three heads: Eco-socialism and Environmental Political Theories; International Comparison on Red-Green Movement and Practice; and Eco-socialism and Constructing Socialist Ecological Civilization in China. Cutting across this were substantive themes at several levels of generality. The international relations focus showcased work on environmental diplomacy, UN governance mechanisms, and the role of the GEF (Global Environment Facility). At a national level the focus was consumerism and the logic of capital, impacts of China’s growth economy, environmental rights, and the state and civil society in disaster management. Regional case studies covered environmentalism in India, water, subsistence agriculture, Korean oil spills, and moves towards energy saving. Finally, there were critical theoretical papers on O’Connor’s eco-Marxism, alternative communities, the gendered ecological footprint, and the concept of “ecological civilization.”

As locals explained to us, Shandong is famous for its fresh water springs, but its wealth of natural resources also means that Jinan people are exposed to 24-hour smokestack flares from its steelworks. China’s greenhouse gas pollution is increasingly serious, but *per capita* emissions are negligible in comparison to the U.S. figure. Beyond the city, driving south towards Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, there are carefully tended mixed-crop farms and intensive tree planting. Later I spent a few days getting to know Beijing, home to 16 million people, history at every turn. Despite mid-morning gridlock, I am surprised to find the air quality much on a par with Los Angeles or London. Again, not to justify the environmentally parasitic character of urban living, Beijing is a sprawling city of gymnastic architectural styles, countless educational institutions, and clockwork public transit systems. There are busy cycle paths and clean pavements lined with early summer roses. In the parks, family generations idle together as toddlers play. Off the grand boulevards, small lanes open into *hutong* where everyday life goes on—a friendly woman teacher pastes up a public notice, clothes flap on a makeshift line, the delivery boy naps in his cart. I am amazed at the variety and quality of foods in this culture where obesity is so uncommon. But all that is to run ahead.

In Shandong, two theoretical concepts dominated the conference conversation—"eco-socialism" and "ecological civilization." Saral Sarkar's keynote set the scene with "Why Eco-Socialism?" Making his case in relation to today's global oil and food crises, he reminded the audience that when Engels spoke of the "revenge of nature," he imagined that science and technology could resolve things. What Engels did not fully understand, according to Sarkar, was that "there are also 'limits' to science and technological development." However, Engels would certainly have appreciated that

... the ecologically necessary contraction of industrial economies cannot take place under capitalism ... The steps that need to be taken to stop further economic growth and then to start a process of contraction can only be taken if the whole economy is under the control of the government. The retreat from today's general growth mania must be planned and managed.

Do-Wan Ku was equally concerned over industrialization and his *tour de force* "Alternative Development: Beyond Ecological Communities and Associations" observed that recent South Korean administrations had each made choices that would inevitably result in "eco-social" crisis. Ku noted that since the 80s, dependency theory and the analysis of neocolonial state monopoly capitalism had "faded from the scene, giving way to developmental state theory or to advancement discourses." His paper worked through a systematic taxonomy of Western and Korean literature in political ecology, finally opting for a middle way:

... we need a strategy for converting developmental states or capitalist states into ecological welfare states on the basis of ecological communities or associations, and at the same time, creating self-governing associations that would develop ecological democracy beyond the framework of the state ...

I am reminded of the local village councils and communes that flourished after the Communist Revolution in China half a century ago. According to the inspirational book *Chinese Women Speak*, published in the 1950s by Australian writer Dymphna Cusack, energetic women at that time were prominent managers of the neighborhood and local environmental conditions.

Masatsugu Maruyama's paper "Evaluating Japanese Agricultural Policy: From an Eco-socialist Perspective" offered a subsistence perspective on capital's ongoing extraction of primitive accumulation from the periphery. He drew on the work of Maria Mies and Claudia von Werlhof and also acknowledged Ted Benton's red-green effort to reformulate the concept of labor in an eco-regulatory way. Linking this to the broader ecofeminist analysis of "caring labor," Maruyama argued that:

... capital regards farmers and housewives as paradoxical entities because they produce what capitalism itself does not produce. They bring about the most important thing for general maintenance of capitalistic accumulation, but the capitalistic systems cannot yet separate them materially from the means of production ... They are both "nature." ... [And] Capitalist production as a social production dislikes "natural limitation" ...

As an OECD member, Japan committed early to economic growth and trade liberalization and succumbed to an agricultural policy imposed by the Uruguay Round. It is salient now, in a time of apparent "global food scarcity," to recall that it was the GATT "multiple functions policy" which redefined agriculture as being not just a matter of production for people's food but a "public service to the nation." Today, this irrational and disembodied logic has led to a situation where food cultivation is readily converted to biofuel cropping for transport, and where prices soar as food commodities fall into the

hands of hedge fund speculators. To paraphrase Maruyama: Rational *Homo Economicus* mistakes Means for End! Like other so-called advanced states, Japan is caught on the contradiction between free market globalization versus environmental protection, and this is exacerbated by the nonsense of “bureaucratic monitoring.” In his words:

... protection of agriculture is impossible unless we do refuse an international market of farm products. Furthermore, to join agriculture together with environmental protection, we have no alternative other than to construct(ing) the market where local people can confirm the credibility of environmental safety for themselves.

During an informal moment towards the end of the weekend, I raised a question about the alternative globalization movement and its commitment to “food sovereignty” or local self-sufficiency. Like “energy sovereignty” this is a pivotal principle in the politics of ecological sustainability and global justice, but it seemed unfamiliar to both the academic panel speakers and the audience. An American educated voice from the floor—possibly thinking in terms of conventional realist international relations, dismissed “food sovereignty” as a “contradictory idea.” Yet within a week or so, the South Koreans would be making their own case for it, with violent street protests against imports of U.S. beef suspected of harboring mad cow disease.

A brief account like this cannot hope to do justice to the many fine presentations in Shandong. The conference benefited from simultaneous translation, and participants begged more time for open discussion in plenaries. I would have liked a serious conversation about eco-socialism and “the woman question;” about the interconnection of productive and reproductive economies; and about how “poverty” and “development” have become weapons in the ideological armory of global capital accumulation and its financial institutions. Although half the audience were women, and postgrad researchers Chenxing Guo, Wenjuan Lu, and Xinlei Li presented well argued papers on mainstream topics, the program as such was not gender balanced.

Over lunch, I learned that Women’s Studies is not an academic discipline in China, and some students believed feminism to be a conservative politics. In response, I recounted how feminism had evolved as a multi-paradigm theoretical field, ranging from Right to Left through—liberal, cultural, poststructural, Marxist, socialist, radical, anarcha, and ecological feminisms. My own presentation “How the Ecological Footprint is Gendered: Implications for Eco-socialist Theory and Praxis” drew on climate change and the Kyoto principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” to demonstrate the challenge posed by ecofeminism. An inclusive political ecology must

... uncover how gendered power relations enter into the formulation of political indicators like the ecological footprint and how they undermine the coherence of visions like eco-socialism. As scholars our work is to help activists and communities understand the gender bias built into theoretical constructs like accumulation, labor, class, dialectics, and materialism, and to revitalize such tools where necessary.

Qingzhi Huan addressed the “Growth Economy and its Ecological Impacts on China,” drawing a useful distinction between a “growing” economy and a “growth” economy. The first is transitional and designed to meet people’s basic needs; the second is terminal, designed as capitalism is for the aggrandizement of a few at the expense of the many. Against a backdrop of hard data on China’s GDP, Energy Inputs, and Pollution Outputs, Huan reviewed the emergence of Chinese ecological policy, a history with three official stages:

- Environmental Protection National Policy 1978-91
In 1978, the CPC shifted its politics from class struggle to economic construction, and in 1983, adopted environmental protection and family planning policies. Six years later the *Environmental Protection Law* was passed by the National People's Congress, with administrative capacity provided by the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA).
- Sustainable Development Strategy 1992-2001
In 1987, China adopted the Brundtland thesis that economic growth and sustainability can be compatible, and the country supported the idea of "sustainable development" at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. At this time, NEPA was upgraded to the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), with ministerial status and 160,000 employees.
- Scientific Concept of Development or Ecological Modernization 2002 -
A reconceptualization of the relation between growth and sustainability was introduced by Jintao Hu as CPC Secretary-General in 2004. The new direction of "scientific development" was characterized by "quality, competitiveness, and environment-friendliness." Like the European approach to sustainability through "ecological modernization," scientific development would be at once "good and efficient."

Well aware of shortcomings in each of these models, Huan commented that in recent years, there has been a new willingness among China's political leaders and public alike to acknowledge the costs of economic growth. So now, he prefigured a fourth possible stage for environmental policy based on the popular construct of "ecological civilization." Huan identified this as embracing a red-green philosophy. A paper by Hongbing Chen on "O'Connor's Ecological Marxism and the Construction of Ecological Culture" seemed relevant here. Chen argued that the theory of "the second contradiction" was overly productivist and ignored the complex web of intentionality that exists between humans and nature. Chen's emphasis on reconnecting with the deeper cultural aspects of an ecological civilization coincides with the ecofeminist rejection of a too narrow economic eco-socialism.

But not everyone interprets the term ecological civilization in an eco-socialist or ecofeminist way. Some may even see an opportunity to advance neoliberal markets under the rubric. In this context, I was fascinated to learn that Maurice Strong, the Canadian businessman who brokered the Rio Earth Summit and fostered ecotourism as a salve for Costa Rica's economy, is now living in China. Moreover, Strong is interested in "ecological civilization"—an expanding subject area in Chinese universities. Putting two and two together, it occurs to me that Maurice Strong's Agenda 21 project, might be on the way to being surpassed in a few years' time, by a new global round of corporate policy initiatives inspired by, or in response to, the Asian powerhouse.

In terms of deepening red-green theory, the articulation of "ecological civilization" by Chinese academics might be served by the humanity-nature dialectic found in traditional Chinese scientific practice. Some of us in the West became aware of this sensibility through the work of mid 20th century sinologist Joseph Needham, author of the two-volume study *Science and Civilisation in China*. While the European scientific Enlightenment resulted in reductionist, instrumental, and anti-life methodologies penetrating almost every field of modernist knowledge, Chinese learning created a logic of "internal relations." Even so,

Needham showed that China's nature dialectic influenced a minority tradition in European philosophy; and that, in turn, helped shape the materialist process thinking of Marx, eventually arriving back full circle with Mao's theory of complex contradiction or "overdetermination."

So the question arises: if the concept of ecological civilization does mark a new stage in Chinese environmental policy, will it develop the classical logic of China's own scientific tradition? A holistic ecological rationality grounded in this philosophy of internal relations could provide fresh intellectual leadership for an international community now stalled on the rhetoric of ecological modernization and incoherent compromises like Cartagena and Kyoto.

While we were enjoying our intellectual exchanges in Shandong, China at-large had mobilized for its mind-boggling rescue effort in the earthquake-devastated region of Sichuan. Every day the television played over and over the tragedy, helping people grieve the unbelievable loss, yet also celebrating the commitment of leaders; the discipline, skill, and courage of soldiers and citizens. I saw two uniformed young men holding up an old woman among the ruins and gently feeding her with a small spoon. Yes, I thought, this is what an army is for. The English-language broadcast CCTV9 and other channels showed shattered towns and bereft parents railing at the government over building standards in the collapsed schools where their children had died. Then a news strip whizzed across the screen announcing that all but two sources of radioactivity in the quake zone had been secured. A few days later, a newspaper piece confirmed that "Chinese teams have located 50 hazardous radioactive sources following the massive earthquake in Sichuan province, of which 15 are yet to be recovered." It turned out that the country's chief nuclear weapons research lab at Mianyang was in the disaster area, and now local officials were concerned not only about summer disease outbreaks, but downstream nuclear contamination of rice-growing plains.

And I wondered about the possible role of other public works in relation to the quake—complex internal relations so typically ignored by the modernist engineering mindset. There are known links between geological instability and the depletion of aquifers, mining, subterranean pressures from constructed dams, and—if carbon sequestration is adopted in the future, there could be more earth adjustments and displacements. Today the E.U., U.S., and Australia, promote the nuclear industry and sequestration as supposedly "scientific" solutions to climate change, and they argue as if Sellafield, Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl had never happened. Regulatory failures do occur, and in every country. But regulation is not really the issue here—industrial growth always leaves collateral damage somewhere. Maurice Strong's next big international summit might well take up this question of unanticipated consequences, because for sure, the Western voodoo of risk analysis will not sustain an ecological civilization.