

# Humans Must Conquer Nature: Philosophical and Religious Sources of China's Anti-Environmental Ideology

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## Abstract

Traditional Chinese philosophy is well known for its monistic cosmology in which heaven, earth, and human beings are mutually implicated in an evolving organic process known as the Way (*dao*). This vision is broadly shared by Daoists and Confucians and was the cosmological foundation of the state ideology of Imperial China. Tu Weiming refers to this as an "anthropocosmic" vision, which he contrasts with Cartesian dualism, instrumental rationality and the entire logical underpinnings of the Western Enlightenment mentality. This logic, according to standard interpretations of Chinese modernization, was adopted in toto by the May 4th generation of Chinese modernizers in the early 20th century. The implication of this view is that the ills associated with modernization, including in particular the alienation of human subjectivity from objective nature, derive from the Western Enlightenment mentality and are not endemic within Chinese culture. This paper argues, however, that the history of Chinese concepts of nature has not been uniform or monolithic, and there exists within traditional Chinese culture, philosophy and religion a wide range of views about the relationship between human beings and their natural environment. In particular, the paper draws attention to the history of more dualistic paradigms in which na-

ture and human beings are viewed as being pitted together in a struggle for supremacy. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that the origin of China's contemporary environmental woes cannot be located simply in the rejection of traditional Chinese culture and the adoption of Western enlightenment values. In fact Mao's glorification of the human struggle with nature has deep roots within Chinese culture and history.

### **Introduction**

In 2000, the American Academy of Arts and Science published an issue of its journal *Daedalus* on the topic of modernity considered from a variety of cultural perspectives. In that issue, the contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Weiming made the following argument regarding the Chinese encounter with modernity in the twentieth century (2000: 201):

The modern West's dichotomous world view (spirit/matter, mind/body, physical/mental, sacred/profane, creator/creature, God/man, subject/object) is diametrically opposed to the Chinese holistic mode of thinking. Arguably, it is also a significant departure from ancient Greek, Judaic, and early Christian spiritual traditions. Informed by Bacon's knowledge as power and Darwin's survival through competitiveness, the Enlightenment mentality is so radically different from any style of thought familiar to the Chinese mind that it challenges all dimensions of the Sinic world. While the Enlightenment faith in instrumental rationality fueled by the Faustian drive to explore, know and subdue nature spurred spectacular progress in science and technology, it also became a justification for imperialist domination and colonial exploitation. As the international rules of the game, defined in terms of wealth and power, were superimposed on China by gunboat diplomacy, Chinese intellectuals accepted the inevitability of Westernization as a necessary strategy for survival.

Here, Tu Weiming is proposing a narrative by means of which to explain the revolutionary changes that China experienced in the twentieth century: China's intellectuals abandoned their holistic mode of thinking in which heaven, earth and humanity were considered parts of a mutually interdependent evolving cosmos, and instead adopted a di-

chotomous Western mode of thinking in which humanity is placed in opposition to nature. This choice was forced upon China by the colonial aggressions of the West in the nineteenth century, and was adopted as a “necessary strategy” rather than by free choice or desire.

The consequences of this way of thinking about China’s encounter with modernity are twofold: firstly, China’s encounter with modernity is to be understood fully and solely within the context of China’s violent and humiliating engagement with the West in the nineteenth century; secondly, therefore, the negative consequences associated with modernization are also the product of this violent encounter and are not intrinsic elements of traditional Chinese ways of thinking. In other words the process of modernization undertaken by China’s revolutionaries in the twentieth century was a strategic choice to embrace Western thinking and did not emerge in an organic way from China’s cultural traditions. The question that this paper attempts to answer is the extent to which the negative environmental consequences associated with modernization were also the product of this violent encounter and subsequent “strategic choice” and, conversely, the extent to which they were supported by traditional Chinese culture. The reason for asking this question is that if the negative consequences of modernization can be blamed fully on the process of Westernization then there is hope for thinking that the rehabilitation of Chinese tradition that is currently under way in the People’s Republic of China may also yield patterns of thought and habits of action that are beneficial for China’s transition to an ecologically sustainable future. If, on the other hand, the negative environmental consequence of modernization were abetted in China by elements of traditional Chinese culture, then the current revival of interest in traditional Chinese culture may not necessarily be as beneficial for the environment as authors such as Tu Weiming imply.

## Modernization

Of all the various consequences of modernization, the one under consideration here is the Weberian concept of *Entzauberung*, variously translated as disenchantment or rationalization. Weber employed this term to describe a process whereby modern societies distinguish themselves from the pre-modern world by their embrace of rationality, not simply as a philosophical principle, but also as a practical strategy for engaging the world.

Ernest Gellner (1987: 153) defines this concept as follows:

The modern world is organized in a rational way. This means that clearly specified goals are pursued by a calculated allocation of means; the means include not only tools but also human activity and men themselves. These things are treated instrumentally and not as ends in themselves. Effectiveness and evidence are kings. The procedures are also rational in the sense of being orderly and rule-bound: like cases are treated alike. (Gellner 1987: 153)

The consequences of this modern process of rationalization are to be observed in the way nation states organize themselves based on the formal procedures of the rule of law, and also, more broadly, in the cultural shift that comes about as a result of the embrace of an objective view of nature. Gellner continues:

It is not only the procedures of organizations which are in this sense 'bureaucratized'; the same also happens to our vision of nature, of the external world. Its comprehensibility and manipulability are purchased by means of subsuming its events under orderly, symmetrical, precisely articulated generalisations and explanatory models. *This* is Disenchantment: the Faustian purchase of cognitive, technological and administrative power, by the surrender of our previous meaningful, humanly suffused, humanly responsive, if often also menacing or capricious world. *That* is abandoned in favour of a more a more predictable, more amenable, but coldly indifferent and uncanny world." (Gellner 1987: 153)

Here Gellner, interpreting Weber, agrees with Tu Weiming that the Faustian bargain driven by moderns is central to understanding the process of modernization: through science we gain knowledge over the natural world, and thus the power to reshape it through

technology (Tu's instrumental rationality); but this comes at the expense of a loss of intimacy or a feeling of dependence on, or interdependence with, the natural world. (The Romantic movement in the West can thus be understood as an attempt to regain the feeling of intimacy with nature that was lost in this transformation). Tu's argument that China's intellectuals adopted a strategy of revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can also be viewed as an extension of this Faustian bargain: Chinese modernizers made a strategic, rational calculation to adopt alien patterns of thinking and social forms in order to gain mastery of their own destiny and reshape China as a strong and independent power. Abandoned in this process is what Tu terms "the Chinese holistic mode of thinking" which runs counter to the dualism of classical scientific objectivity and counter to the legal formalism of the modern nation state. What China's modernizers did not fully anticipate was that the process of modernization would entail a series of negative consequences, not the least of which was the alienation of human subjectivity from the environmental processes upon which it depends for life. Tu implies, but does not state, that were China to embrace once again its "holistic mode of thinking" then this would go some way towards mitigating the negative effects associated with modernization. At the very least it would enable Chinese people to recover their lost feeling of interdependence with the natural world.

As a logical argument this makes perfect sense. Tu assumes, however, that the dominant tradition of China's culture and philosophy can correctly be categorized as a "holistic mode of thinking." This essay is an attempt to question that assumption and to investigate the extent to which this assumption indeed holds true. In so doing it aims to excavate other, more dualistic forms of thought within Chinese tradition, and to suggest that China's em-

brace of a “war on nature” was not a rejection of the whole of Chinese tradition, but only one part of it.

### **Holistic Thought and its Impact**

The basic source for holistic thinking in Chinese philosophy is what Tu Weiming terms Confucianism’s “anthropocosmic vision” and can be divided into two main principles. The first is the concept of resonance (*ganying*); the second is the Neo-Confucian concept of a monistic cosmos patterned from vital force (*Qi*). The concepts of vital force and resonance rose to the fore in philosophical and medical literature of the former Han dynasty. Robert Weller (2006: 24) cites one such text in which resonance is understood as a cosmic force that joins disparate elements together:

When the magnet seeks iron, something pulls it, when trees planted close together [lean] apart, something pushes them. When the sage faces south and stands with a mind bent on loving and benefiting the people, and before his orders have been issued, the [people of the world] all crane their necks and stand on tip-toe; it is because he has communicated with the people via the Vital Essence.

By the time of the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song dynasty (960-1279) these intuitions of invisible cosmic forces had been subsumed into a monistic cosmology based on the concept of *Qi* or vital force. The various forces of the cosmos were not to be understood as absolutely discrete entities but as the the result of the continuous and evolving transformation of *Qi*. One of the most famous exponents of this cosmology was Zhang Zai (1020-1077). His famous Western Inscription begins thus:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (Trans. Chan 1963: 497) .

That which “fills the universe” is Qi, the universal cosmic power. Tu Weiming cites Zhang Zai’s explanation of Qi as follows:

[Qi] fills the universe. And as it completely provides for the flourish[ing] and transformation of all things, it is all the more spatially unrestricted. As it is not spatially restricted, it operates in time and proceeds with time. From morning to evening, from spring to summer, and from the present tracing back to the past, there is no time at which it does not operate, and there is no time at which it does not produce. Consequently, as one sprout bursts forth it becomes a tree with a thousand big branches, and as one egg evolves, it progressively becomes a fish capable of swallowing a ship. (Quoted in Tu 1998: 112)

Tu’s term for this dominant Neo-Confucian view of Qi is “the continuity of being” a phrase that denotes a holistic, integrated cosmos in which no element of being is absolutely separated from any other element. This is precisely the view oppose by the Enlightenment mentality, which focuses on radical dualisms between spirit and matter and self and other. Although Chinese cosmology employed dualistic terms such as heaven and earth, or yin and yang, these were to be understood as complementary dualisms not absolute dichotomies. In the Confucian view, therefore, heaven and humanity ideally form a harmonious unity (tian ren he yi) as all manifest the operations of the same underlying material substance or Qi.

The ecological consequences of this monistic cosmology have become a source of fascination for contemporary thinkers. Japanese Confucian Okada Takehiko understands the Confucian cosmos as implying an ethical matrix that unites the human world with the non-human. In an interview with Rodney Taylor her reports:

Yes I think we do [have this responsibility], and such an ideal should be extended to all forms of life, animals and plants alike. The Confucian concept of being in community (forming one body) with other human beings can be extended to the community of life itself. ... All humankind has a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others and this is something that should be applied to all life. (Taylor 1998: 47)

Notwithstanding the views of contemporary Confucian apologists, there is much evidence to suggest, however, that this ideal view of the unity of the cosmos failed to translate historically into harmonious human relationships with nature. Historians of the Chinese environment suggest that Chinese people have been in an aggressively adversarial relationship with their environment for millennia. Richard von Glahn's (1987) study of the expansion of the Han empire into present-day Sichuan (south-west China) involved the transformation of the native people's "civilization of the forest" by the Han Chinese "civilization of the plains." The result was the emergence of a revitalized economy based on the commercial exploitation of non-renewable natural resources such as minerals and timber from the frontier regions by the wealthy urban elite. The economic pattern of Han Chinese colonial expansion thus bears important similarities with the colonial expansion into the Americas and even the present-day resource economy of Canada.

More problematic still is the conclusion to Mark Elvin's (2004) massive environmental history of China, *The Retreat of the Elephants*:

The religious, philosophical, literary, and historical texts surveyed and translated in the foregoing pages have been rich sources of description, insight, and even, perhaps, inspiration. But the dominant ideas and ideologies, which were often to some degree in contradiction with each other, appear to have little explanatory power in determining why what seems actually to have happened to the Chinese environment happened the way it did. Occasionally, yes, Buddhism helped to safeguard trees around monasteries. The law-enforced mystique shrouding Qing imperial tombs kept their surroundings untouched by more than minimal economic exploitation. but in general, no. There seems no case for thinking that, some details apart, the Chinese anthropogenic environment was developed and maintained in the way it was over the long run of more than three millennia because of particular characteristically Chinese beliefs or perceptions. or, at least, not in comparison with the massive effects of the pursuit of power and profit in the arena provided by the possibilities and limitations of the Chinese natural world, and the technologies that grew from interactions with them. (Elvin 2004: 470-471).



In other words, as regards the anthropogenic effects of three millennia of Chinese civilization upon the natural environment, Chinese beliefs and perceptions were of relatively little consequence in comparison to the “massive effects of the pursuit of power and profit.” This view, however, discounts the notion that the “pursuit of power and profit” is itself a cultural perception. Moreover it assumes that the Neo-Confucian view of a harmonious unity between humans and their environments in fact represented the dominant cultural perception. The argument I wish to pursue in the remaining part of this essay is that the Neo-Confucian ideal represented simply that: an ideal perpetuated by a tradition of elite scholars that represented not the dominant cultural perception of nature but rather the ideal view nurtured by centuries of Confucian scholarship and strategically denigrated by China’s modernizers.

### **Humans must Conquer Nature**

The radical alternative to the idealistic Confucian view of human-nature relationships is to be found in the four-character phrase “humans must conquer nature” (*ren ding sheng tian*) a slogan that gained popularity in the Maoist period and which is commonly associated with the environmental devastation that China’s revolutionaries brought about in the twentieth century. This concept is most clearly elucidated in Shapiro (2001), which provides a wealth of evidence to argue that specific elements of Maoist ideology rather than simple ignorance or stupidity were responsible for the massive environmental problems that began to plague China in the twentieth century. In particular she identifies political repression, utopian urgency, and dogmatic formalism as three key components of Maoist ideology that each played an important role in exacerbating environmental problems or in

hindering attempts to mitigate them. Altogether these factors constituted what Shapiro terms a “war on nature,” a war that was conceptually predicated on Mao’s philosophy of voluntarism in which ideas were viewed as “having the power to mobilize efforts to transform the material world” (Shapiro 2001: 67). Willpower would compensate for China’s lack of technological development, and ideas would “unleash raw labor to conquer and remold nature.” Shapiro continues:

“Man must conquer nature” (*Ren Ding Sheng Tian*), Mao declared, sounding the phrase that many Chinese mention as the core of Mao’s attitude towards the natural world. (67)

The impression Shapiro gives here is that Mao’s “declaration of war” on nature constituted a new development in the history of China’s relationship with its environment, or at the very least a new development in the conception of nature that was promulgated among the people. In fact the four character phrase “Man must conquer nature” has a long historical pedigree that is worth investigating more carefully in order to assess the extent to which Mao’s voluntarism represented a revolutionary and wholly novel concept of the environment, or whether he was drawing upon a strand of Chinese thinking about the environment that has deep historical roots and wide cultural resonance.

The key to understanding this four-character slogan is the word “nature” (*tian*). The root meaning of this word is “sky” or “heaven” and refers not to the earthly domain of living creatures but more mysteriously to the heavenly forces that in traditional Chinese cosmology were thought to direct human fate. To struggle against and conquer nature, or heaven, (*tian*) is thus to assert the primacy of the human spirit over and against the cosmic powers that define the various parameters of human existence including most especially the time of one’s birth and death, and whether one’s life will be blessed by good fortune, prosperity

and happiness. In this context, therefore, the war against nature (or heaven) is closely related to the concept of fate or destiny (*ming*); and indeed the two terms are most famously connected in the binome “mandate of heaven” (*tianming*) referring to the imperial authority bestowed by the heavens. The concept of “conquering nature,” (*sheng tian*), therefore, does not necessarily imply any kind of environmental consequence in the sense of the human relationship with the biological matrix that supports human life. It can equally take on a more existential or even spiritual aspect, referring to the struggle against the vicissitudes of fate or the seemingly implacable realities that define the parameters of human existence.

This aspect of the “struggle with nature” can further be illuminated by considering Chinese religion and popular culture. In terms of popular Chinese religion, temples are filled each day with people inquiring as to the auspicious days for marriage, conducting business affairs, or winning in the casino. All this network of religious activity presupposes a concept of fate or “given-ness,” the pre-ordained limits within which individual lives operate, and against which individual lives struggle. Popular religion can thus be understood as pleading with gods to alter one’s fate, or learning through divination what one’s fate is to be. In both these cases one can view popular temples and other sacred spaces as arenas in which the negotiation with fate or “struggle against nature” takes place.

In contrast to the popular religious tradition of negotiating one’s destiny with the heavenly gods, the *leitmotiv* of China’s longevity traditions is the opposite: “my destiny is my own and does not lie with the heavens” (*wo ming zai wo bu zai tian*). Proponents of Chinese longevity (*yangsheng*) techniques thus argued that the necessities for prolonging life were within the reach of the individual body and could be attained through various energetic (*Qi*) practices and did not necessarily require the intervention of divine beings or

heavenly forces (see Robinet 2000: 212). Longevity practitioners thus operated from the same framework as religious practitioners, that is to say, the concept of life as a struggle against the fore-ordained limits of existence, but the arena for negotiating with fate was not considered to be the local temple but rather one's own body.

To take a further example, we can determine from contemporary Chinese popular culture that the concept of struggling with fate continues to hold meaning. The four character phrase "humans must conquer nature" (*ren ding sheng tian*) is parodied, for example, in the title of a 2003 Hong Kong comedy with the English title *Fate Fighter* (Cheng Wai-Man 2003). The film tells the story of an ill-fated young man who struggles to obtain the good-fortune with which heaven has endowed his brother. This again serves as an example that the phrase "conquering nature" does not necessarily imply the negative environmental consequences associated with Maoism. Rather it can have a more existential connotation, as these three examples indicate.

This is not to say, however, that the anti-environmental connotations of "conquering nature" were produced as a result of Maoist voluntarism. Indeed this essay seeks to make the contrary argument, that the idea of struggling against and conquering nature is deep-rooted within Chinese thought and culture and was not invented *ex nihilo* by China's revolutionaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The connection here is that the concept "heaven" or "fate" (*tian*) also covers some of the same semantic range as the English "environment" and "nature." To struggle against one's fate is, especially in a pre-modern society, to struggle against the limits that nature and environment place on the ability to fulfill one's potential. (Indeed the historical context of a nation struggling against all manner of natural disasters such as flooding and famine

makes the idealistic Confucian vision of harmony with nature all the more remarkable). The semantic overlap of biological nature and heavenly destiny is revealed most clearly in the Chinese myth “Jingwei fills the seas” (*Jingwei tian hai*), a classic tale from the *Scripture of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan hai jing*; 3rd century B.C.E). The myth tells of the daughter of the sun god Yandi who drowned in the eastern sea. In death she was transformed into Jingwei, a bird who for ever after carried little branches and dropped them into the sea in a futile attempt to fill it up. The phrase *Jingwei tian hai* is now an idiom meaning “determination in the face of great odds,” and can be interpreted either positively as a story of the indomitable human spirit, or negatively, somewhat similar to the English phrase “banging one’s head against a brick wall.”

Whether one chooses to interpret this myth positively or negatively, one thing is clear: In this story Jingwei’s struggle is both against fate and the physical environment. The natural environment, in the form of the sea, provides the context in which Jingwei’s struggle takes on its meaning. Jingwei’s struggle to fill up the sea with branches thus symbolizes the eternal struggle of human beings against their fate. In this story, therefore, nature, fate and environment are bound together to form the overarching context for human existence. This is hardly surprising in a country that historically, and to the present, has been defined by its struggles against floods.

The relationship between heaven and humans is thus that heaven commands or mandates the circumstances in which humans exist. Heaven defines the contours of people’s lives, in the same way that in astrology the position of the stars and the planets creates the basic disposition for individual human lives. Heaven demarcates the finitude of human existence and at the same time poses an existential challenge to human beings to overcome

the limitations or conditions of existence that have been imposed upon them. These limitations or conditions of existence, especially in pre-modern China, may be concretely experienced by human beings in their struggles against the power of nature especially as revealed in floods and other natural disasters. In this regard the classical myth of Yu the Great who controlled the spring flooding is also relevant. Yu's greatness consisted precisely in his ability to dominate the power of nature and provide a more amenable context for human flourishing.

### **Nature as a Discrete Domain of Cosmic Power**

The examples above reveal a view of humans and their environment (whether interpreted physically or existentially) in an antagonistic relationship with each other. An alternative strand of interpretation also exists within the Chinese tradition, which views heaven or nature to be fundamentally distinct from the realm of human beings and not related to them in an antagonistic way.

The biography of Wu Zisu (d. c. 484 B.C.E.) recorded by Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.E.) records the phrase "I have heard that human masses defeat nature, and nature indeed also destroys humans." This idea seems to indicate a complementary rather than adversarial relationship between humans and nature. In effect, humans and nature are not by definition oriented towards each other in a mutually adversarial relationship. Rather each proceeds to operate in its own way with the unfortunate but unintended consequences for each other: although nature does indeed destroy human beings, it is also the case that humans destroy nature. The implication is that it would be a mistake to attribute agency to the part of nature, to imagine that the natural world has a deliberate bent against human

beings. Rather, the fact that nature destroys humans and vice versa simply indicates the natural functioning, each in accord with their separate purposes.

The view that humans and nature are not in fact properly related to each other was articulated most fully by the Confucian philosopher Xunzi (313-230 B.C.E.):

When the stars fall or the sacred trees groan, all the people become afraid and ask: "What is the significance of all this?" I would say: "There is no special significance. This is just due to a modification of Heaven [or nature] and earth and the mutation of the yin and yang. These are rare phenomena. We may marvel at them but we should not fear them." (trans. de Bary 1960: 102)

Here Xunzi argues that natural phenomena are not to be interpreted in terms that are significant for human beings. In effect, the natural world and the social world are discrete and disconnected domains of existence. This view stands in contrast to the more organic view that saw heavenly portents and natural disasters as signs of some dysfunction in the realm of human affairs. In such a view, religious sacrifices or other rituals might play a role in readjusting the cosmic equilibrium between the state and the heavens in the same way that a doctor might administer acupuncture to readjust the flow of *qi* inside a patient's body. Xunzi, on the other hand refused to believe that humans have the ability to influence nature on a cosmic scale, and had a more psycho-social view of the function of religious rituals.

If people pray for rain and it rains, how is that? I would say: Nothing in particular. Just as when people do not pray for rain it also rains. When people try to save the sun or moon from being swallowed up [in eclipse], or when they pray for rain in a drought, or when they decide an important affair only after divination—this is not because they think in this way they will get what they seek, but only to add a touch of ritual to it. Hence the gentleman takes it as a matter of ritual, whereas the common man thinks it is supernatural. He who takes it as a matter of ritual will suffer no harm; he who thinks it is supernatural will suffer harm. ... (de Bary 1960: 103)

Xunzi's view of ritual—and therefore religion—is not as an economic mediator between human desires and heavenly supplies, constantly adjusting the relationship between the two. Indeed he clearly denounces popular religious prayers to gods as form of idle superstition. Ritual is useful because it performs valuable psychological and communal functions, not because it actually produces some magical manipulation of nature. This is because in Xunzi's view heaven, that is the disposition of affairs in nature, is quite simply beyond human control.

This view of heavens and humans as discrete domains reached its apogee in the work of the Tang dynasty literatus Liu Yuxi (772-842) in an essay "On nature" (*Lun tian*) in which he wrote:

The power of nature is [the power to do what] humans in fact cannot do; the power of humans is [the power to do what] nature also cannot do. Thus I say "Nature and humans mutually defeat each other."

According to Luo Jianjin (1999), Liu Yuxi "pointed out that nature and humans each have their own capacities and incapacities. Here 'defeat' means 'be superior to', 'exceed', 'be stronger than,' and does not mean 'vanquish in battle.' The above text is a comparison of the respective strengths of nature and humans." In this interpretation, therefore, the concept of humans "defeating" nature and vice versa does not indicate some cosmic war or eternal struggle between humans and the heavens or the natural world, but rather that each operates in its own domain and has its own relative strengths and capacities.

### **Nature as Obstacle to Progress**

Having reviewed these various connotations of the phrase "humans must defeat nature" it is clear that the phrase does not necessarily connote the anti-environmental ideol-



ogy that Shapiro seems to suggest. It is also clear that this phrase did not invent in the Maoist period but has a deeper history within Chinese culture. Shapiro is right, however, to locate the Maoist interpretation of the phrase by reference to Mao's voluntarist philosophy. In this philosophical outlook, the word "nature" is simply a cipher for whatever Mao deemed to be an obstacle to revolution. A famous statement of Mao Zedong in his youth was "To struggle with heaven [or nature] is fun forever! To struggle with earth is fun forever! To struggle with people is fun forever!" In these statements "Heaven" or "nature" connotes all manner of insurmountable social problems and cannot be simply equated with biological context for human life. For example, when Mao famously cited the story of the Foolish Old Man who Moved the Mountain (*Yu gong yi shan*) from the Daoist philosopher Liezi (c. 4th century B.C.E), he interpreted the mountain as the "three mountains of oppression", namely, feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism, and imperialism (Liu 1999). Here we can see Mao distinctively brought the concept of "defeating nature" into the socio-political realm.

Despite the Maoist instinct to view all manner of problems through a political lens, the historical overlap in meaning between heaven, nature and fate persisted into the twentieth century. The Maoist struggle for revolutionary transformation thus bound together the natural environment, religious superstition (as the mediation between humans and fate), and social oppression as enemies of human progress. By the mid-twentieth century, therefore, "humans must conquer nature" became a popular slogan that signified the human spirit locked in a struggle to overcome social, environmental, and theological enemies. At the beginning of her book, Shapiro (2001: vii) quotes a famous revolutionary song: "Let's attack here! / Drive away the mountain gods / Break down the stone walls / To bring out

those 200 million tons of coal.” Here coal-mining is revealed as a theological, economic and political activity: it is a theological activity because it destroys the habitats of the local gods who were thought to reside in the mountain; it is an economic activity because the coal enables economic progress; and it is a political activity because it locates China’s revolutionary progress in the hands of its workers and not its social elites. Shapiro is right, nonetheless, to attribute the environmental disasters of 20<sup>th</sup> century China to Maoist ideology, but the phrase “war against nature” needs to be understood in a more nuanced way. *Tian* or “nature” was not always to be taken literally as denoting the biological context for human life. It also connoted the heavens—and even the gods themselves—as counter-revolutionary agents; and it could also connote any political force that was deemed an obstacle to progress. In this regard Mao was not inventing something new but drawing on a rich heritage of Chinese cultural thinking about the relationship between human beings and their existential contexts.

From this perspective, China’s modernization cannot simply be viewed as the overthrow of traditional understandings of nature, as the Weberian concept of disenchantment implies. In the Chinese context, the secularization of nature implicit in the phrase “driving away the mountain gods” was also bound up with thoroughly traditional Chinese understandings of nature as an obstacle to the human spirit, and was not simply a modern invention. Furthermore, the Maoist use of nature or heaven (*tian*) as a cipher for any obstacle to human progress indicates a continuing theological view of life as cosmic struggle between humans and their divinely-mandated fate. In using the phrase “humans must defeat nature” as a site of “utopian urgency,” Mao in fact went against the secular strain of Chinese thought in which humans and the natural world were viewed as discrete and unrelated domains of

existence. In this regard the Maoist revolutionary drive for progress and modernization retained, rather than rejected, the cosmic significance of “nature” and is not to be viewed in the Weberian sense as a process of disenchantment or rationalization (*Entzauberung*).

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