



YOUR OPINION



★ **China Rising** **China's Quest for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture**

**James Miller: China has to consider its environmental future and must look to concepts of sustainability to do so. With the indigenous religion of Taoism Beijing has all the tools it needs to foster a culture of sustainability.**

Over the past sixty years China has achieved something close to a miracle when compared with other developing nations. It by and large manages to feed, educate, house and employ its own people. It is not involved in futile and costly military conflicts. It is a creditor nation, not a debtor. Its social and political system provides sufficient stability for the vast majority of its people to pursue their own livelihoods in a rational and predictable way.

Yet all this will be lost if the world does not help China to embrace an ecologically sustainable culture.

The reason for this is simple. With a population of 1.4 billion, China simply cannot afford to expand its per capita ecological footprint to the level of Europe, let alone America or Canada. Already the stresses on its environment are beginning to take a toll on the social fabric. The Gobi desert is at Beijing's doorstep and the capital must divert water hundreds of kilometres north from resentful provinces who have to do more with less. The pollution from factories in rural areas prevents farmers from earning a living by growing healthy crops. River life for China's southern neighbours is threatened by massive hydro-electric projects upstream.

Any form of economic development that entails a corresponding increase in per capita ecological footprint can only lead to increased social unrest and geopolitical tension, the consequences of which will extend far across the world. The current arrangement in which the world's economically wealthy regions export their ecological problems onto poorer regions is plainly unsustainable in the long run, never mind morally bankrupt.

The three instruments traditionally advocated to deal with this crisis are technological development, policy changes and legislation. Technological development can help China generate energy more efficiently and with less impact on the environment. Government policies can favour green industries. Legislation can be enacted to make polluters pay.

But as Pan Yue, China's vice minister of environmental protection made clear to me in an interview last year, legislation is only effective when there is universal consent as to its validity. Strict environmental laws are useless if all they do is give polluters an incentive to move to another jurisdiction.

To back up technological, policy and legal reform, it is necessary to create a culture of ecological sustainability. Such a culture denotes the patterns of belief, the system of values, the habits of practice, and the existential orientation that together provide the social, cultural and psychological justification for ecologically responsible decisions. Without such a cultural justification, sustainability is simply an empty word, a concept that is easy to discuss but impossible to implement.

With the right cultural framework, the right set of beliefs, values, habits and orientation, sustainability moves from the arena of discourse to the arena of practice. When sustainability is embedded culturally, it unconsciously shapes the habits of thinking and the patterns of behaviour in the way that people barely notice. In short it comes to define our way of life, our civic values, and our sense of identity.


In order to foster an ecologically sustainable culture, policymakers and environmentalists will have to learn to talk to the most significant cultural actors on the planet, that is to say, religious leaders. Like it or not, the majority of the world's cultures are steeped in centuries of religious beliefs and values that pay little or no regard to the environment as a topic of moral concern. So long as religious leaders ignore the question of the environment as a deep religious concern, the majority of people will behave likewise. But once religious leaders are convinced that the environment is a religious issue, then sustainability will more easily be embedded in the fabric of culture.

Fortunately, in this area China is a leader, rather than a laggard. China's indigenous religion, Taoism, is founded on principles which are easily amenable to today's ecological concerns, and its leaders are eager to promote Taoism as China's green religion. The West would do well to encourage Beijing to think of religion less as a problem to be managed and more as a potential ally in its quest for an ecologically sustainable future.

*James Miller is a professor at Queen's University, Canada specializing in the attitudes of Chinese religions towards nature and environment.*

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### Comments

 October 14, 2009  
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I agree with James Miller over the inherent wealth that China already has in its Taoism, though I would disagree over giving it any tag as that of religion. The principles of Tao do encourage the striking of balance and the maintenance of balance- in nearly every dimension. As a rich wealth, the question would be if the Chinese leadership can mine its own cultural wealth for the health of the Chinese nation-state. If it can find a confluence (millions of Chinese practice the Tai Chi without wondering if that becomes a religion) with policies - the health of the Chinese nation-state would benefit immensely from. The emergence of China as a global power that also can set text-book examples (like the Nordic states do) is very possible indeed. And one may add, quite desirable for the health of the global community.

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 October 29, 2009  
Arvilgon

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While I do like the idea of the cultural component of Taoism calming China's anti-psychotic might calm a hyperactive child, I think that the argument is too romanticized, and does not account for the potential scope of Westernization and American Consumerist influence.

The tenets of Taoism and its root in Chinese culture cannot be denied, however, when we cherry pick cultural virtues in an attempt to explain a societies activities we risk not only stereotyping, but creating mythical concepts such as the "Protestant Work Ethic" to simplify Western economics, or "Confucian Work Ethic" to explain the success of the Asian Tigers.

I hope that the sustainable aspects of Taoism do become dominant as China begins to consider its economic and ecological future, however, I still have a feeling that there will be a point where the cultural revolution's influence may clash, and Chinese policy makers find themselves choosing in an ideological battle that pits Tao against Mao.

 November 1, 2009  
Sarah Crawford, American University

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I agree that religion is a tool that can be used to create a culture of ecological sustainability in China. In her book "Mao's War Against Nature" Judith Shapiro writes of a progression of thought through China's history of Harmony Between the Heavens and Mankind---Man Must Conquer Nature---Look Toward Money in Everything. Religion could be used to return China back to the Harmony Between the Heavens and Mankind mentality, but Taoism is not the only religion that could be utilized to do so.

I have an awareness of Taoism and other eastern religions which promote man's living in harmony with nature, but primarily my knowledge and background is in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Christianity has had a presence in China in recent years. In the Bible, Jesus offers many commentaries on how man should live that are relevant to James Miller's goal of creating a culture of ecological sustainability in China. In particular, Jesus taught his disciples and followers to eschew material possessions, and our present day consumerism has been a driver of our current explosive economic growth (which has led to increasing levels of pollution). On the Sermon on the Mount he said "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21)." And one of his more famous sayings is "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:21)." Here in Washington, D.C., St. Columba's

Episcopal Church has an Environmental Committee to promote environmental awareness in the church and the community. In fact, they are in the initial planning stages of placing solar panels on the roof of the church, so churches and temples are places where ecological sustainable thought can grow and influence their local communities.

On a final note, there is some suspicion that the Communist Party in China is using environmental policies and regulations as a means to exerting more control over their populations, in particular, minorities. A greater religious influence could bring China's environmental policy more in line with the political ecology framework than an ecological modernization model, as the former places more emphasis on the social justice effects of policies. Religious leaders at temples and churches could, based on their moral standing, emphasize that minorities should not be disproportionately harmed by environmental policies, and that environmental regulations are truly going to protect the environment and not just be a new form of subjectivity of the Chinese citizens.

 November 1, 2009  
Elvia Castro, American University

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While perhaps overly optimistic, James Miller is right to point out China's impressive economic achievements and to respect the change that has been accomplished within their social and political system.


Criticism about China's environmental performance, whether positive or negative, is frequently accompanied by judgments against the country's political economy; and arguments that can be summarized as a call to westernize. For instance, Thomas Friedman asks: "Could this turn out to be the first big democracy movement that starts as an environmental movement?" (Hot, Flat and Crowded; p.347) Other authors, like Judith Shapiro, go even further: "the effort to conquer nature... [was] motivated by utopianism to transform the face of the earth and build a socialist paradise, and characterized by coercion, enormity of scale, and great human suffering." (Mao's War Against Nature, p.8) While Shapiro acknowledges that capitalist systems are not inherently better for the environment, she argues that their motivations are more benign: "harnessing and conquering nature... economic incentives, not political coercion..." (p.199)

It is not unusual for the west to be forgiving about its own path to development and the abuses – both environmental and to other people- that led to the wealth and stability we witness today. Miller is right to label the current world arrangement as unsustainable and morally bankrupt.

Finally, harnessing local religion and knowledge to foster an ecologically sustainable culture sounds fabulous. I am all for freedom of religion and local empowerment. Where I disagree is with Miller's suggestion that policymakers should focus on this arena – or that the west should encourage Beijing to view religion as a potential ally. That is, advocating for freedom of religion is hard to oppose, but encouraging political use of religion has been historically problematic.

Tags: [China](#) | [environment](#) |

 November 1, 2009  
Meredith Waters, American University

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Religion has always and will always play an extremely powerful and dynamic role in the way humans operate as a collective unit. Taking that influence and using it to empower the environmental movement, using the core framework and philosophies of the religion, has the potential to benefit the earth and all of its species (religious or not).

However, I feel that there are a few things to take into consideration. The first being the approach to religious leader on making the "necessary" adjustments of influence without conjuring fear of other or further influences (or rather, manipulations) within the fundamentals of the religion. The fear may arise as to the level of engagement between politics and religion. This could effect the development of the new sustainable culture, if it is perceived that politics are riding on the coattails of religion. And that in itself, begs a second question of, is that necessarily a bad thing? Political policies and legislation would then have the moral backing of the people, and therefore be more successful in the implementation stages as well as further environmental regulation and policies.

With culture being such a complexity of philosophies, behaviors, attitudes, and practices, another consideration is the time frame that is needed to establish an ecologically sustainable culture. Is there time for a new culture to be developed in order to make a significant impact on the myriad of China's environmental issues? How many generations does it take to establish a solid cultural foundation? The use of religion may be the answer in expediting this culture development.



November 2, 2009  
Ani Zamgochian, American University

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I feel confident in stating that most people can name a place they've visited which has stirred some sort of spiritual, religious, emotional (call it what you may) connection. For many, these places are within the natural world. Whether we're aware of it or not, there is a "larger than human" sense of natural places. One need only visit the Redwoods in California or trek deep into the Amazon to realize that there are systems that match or exceed human ingenuity. A healthy reverence for nature is necessary for survival, even if one spends the majority of his/her time in a smog-filled city, far away from the "natural world." Therefore, to the extent that it emphasizes ecological stewardship, a "culture of sustainability" can indeed be cultivated through religion. I must admit when I first read this article though, I had a "knee-jerk" reaction that called to mind religious extremism.

I believe there is a risk in any form of indoctrination – even if it means the creation of an environmentally-minded generation. We must therefore exercise caution, as religion quickly becomes clouded by politics and militancy (a perfect example being the Arab-Israeli conflict). This is not to say that religious ecology isn't a useful long-term strategy, but we must also consider more immediate actions. Societies should amass a toolkit with several strategies for reaching and engaging different social groups. In this way it's less about finding one strategy that fits all, and more about devising tailored, interconnected actions for each stakeholder group. In her book, *War on Nature*, Judith Shapiro described Maoism's near-complete indoctrination of Chinese society, and its continuing repercussions on the natural world. Instead of trying to meet the might of the Maoist legacy, there can perhaps be multiple battles at every angle, chipping away at the hangovers. With this method, not everything hinges on the cooperation of religious leaders and the unquestioning acceptance of society.

And finally, would China be willing to forge a new path, away from the United States and other Western nations? Would they be willing to take this risk and truly assume this new form of leadership?



November 2, 2009  
Rong Zhu, American University

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While I agree with Miller that religion might have the power to shape culture and social norms, it is questionable whether the promotion of Daoism could be the way lead to sustainable development.

First, Daoism is more than the idea that harmony between nature and human beings, which also includes action through inaction, detachment, immortality, qigong, so on and so forth. In this case, it is difficult to say how different people would interpret Daoism differently. Second, to many Chinese, their attitudes to religions are utility oriented, and their personal ethics a mixture of Buddhist, Daoism and Confucianism. It is still unclear to which extent these utilitarian oriented beliefs would make people behave environmental friendly, especially when there are conflicts between environment wellbeing and personal interests. Further more, as Shapiro presents in *War Against Nature*, after gone through the imperial period, the war against Japan, and the culture revolution, the Chinese nowadays are experiencing the "trust crisis", and overwhelmed by materialism. To environment issues, some of them are indifferent, some of them have no idea what is happening, some of them care but don't know how to get engaged; at the same time, more people are taking action.

Develop an environment friendly culture and get rid of consumerism and materialism are important and urgent both in China and all around the world, and the way to reach it should be more than religion. It is a complex process including different processes of society, such as further science research and media report to tell people more about facts and causes of environmental problems, get the public concerned and engaged, get the business and government take responsibilities and act accordingly. For China, as Shapiro and Yah mentioned it's more important to get both local citizen and the government to move together to address environmental problems, to build its civil society, and to further its political and economic structure reform.



November 2, 2009  
Eileen Naples, American University

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Like some of the previous posters, I find Mr. Miller's suggestions that religion, specifically Taoism, might play a central role in China's evolving environmental movement both compelling and starry-eyed. I do not question the power of religion to inform action both on a personal and a cultural level, nor do I doubt that Taoism – a thoroughly ecocentric and ancient religious philosophy – has a

valuable role to play in shaping the modern Chinese environmental movement. However, I do question the extent to which China can look specifically to Taoism "as a potential ally in its quest for an ecologically sustainable future."

Taoism's reach as a religious philosophy is limited. As Judith Shapiro notes in *Mao's War Against Nature*, "it is unlikely...that Daoism will reemerge to guide China, for Daoism emphasizes government by inaction and represents too radical an alternative to the Communist Party's statist tradition of remolding nature" (214). Looking to a religion that occupies a marginal place in Chinese society (especially when compared to Confucianism) to wield widespread influence over "the patterns of belief, the system of value, the habits of practice, the existential orientation" is unrealistic.

And yet, as Mr. Miller notes, China (not to mention developed countries like the United States) must embrace an ecologically sustainable ethic if it is to avoid social, political and environmental unrest. So, wherever an ecocentric, if marginal, philosophy like Taoism can encourage popular support for environmental action and legislation, it should be embraced and leveraged by religious and political leaders alike. However, given its marginal place in Chinese society, Taoism must necessarily be seen as one among many instruments for environmental reform, and not relied upon as a silver bullet that can guarantee universal buy-in to widespread environmental reform.



November 2, 2009

[Julien Mikhail Katchinoff, American University SIS, \(1\)](#)

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In this post, James Miller's advocacy for religion as the necessary conduit towards ecological sustainability is alarming, both in its definition of the problem to be targeted, and its blindly hopeful prescriptions. In making his case, Mr. Miller assumes, with the support of the minister of the environment, that the weak link in current Chinese efforts lies solely within a lack of universal consent for its policies. For Mr. Miller, technology, legislation, and policy, combined "with the right cultural framework," will result in environmental sustainability.

By supporting this green cultural adaptation in China, Mr. Miller suggests that popular consent aside, Chinese technology, legislation, and policies are all moving in the 'right' direction. This short-sighted impression fails to offer any delineation between any socio-economic or geo-political groups within China, and paints 1.4 billion with the same brush. Further, it incorrectly assumes that current environmental policy, legislation, and technologies deployed by the Chinese authorities have been successful when followed by the population. Emily Yeh's account (2009) of government efforts in Western China roundly disprove this point by underlining the failures of the 2005 and 2006 national green GDP initiatives through large-scale environmental construction projects.

More troubling, however, is the suggested deployment of religion as a method of controlling the Chinese population. There is a sizable risk that the use of 'green,' just as patriotism and capitalism before it, may become a tool for increased control and marginalization of the Chinese people, in particular rural, and minority groups. A focus on universal consent and ecological prioritization by Mr. Miller seems to also target an urban and socio-economically independent population. Rural citizens with little economic or political power do not have the luxury of adapting new ecological sensibilities to their lifestyles, nor do they have the power to question the environmental consequences of new government policies. In his prescription for the Chinese state, Mr. Miller must realize that "Green" does not automatically create "Good" for everyone and although one might agree with the ends, coercion through spiritual means is a dangerous path to undertake.



November 2, 2009

[Laura Dubin, American University](#)

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I agree with Miller that an increase in economic development and larger ecological footprints will lead to consequences that the entire world will have to face. The capacity for environmental problems to spread and grow, combined with the effects of globalization cause local problems to become global problems. The Vice Minister of Environmental Protection makes a valid point that the world must reach a consensus for environmentally protective actions, especially in light of the increasing globalized nature of these crises. The world of course must refrain from sending their pollution causing practices to countries like China, and it would be helpful if the world could act as a unified voice for environmental protection and demonstrate true sustainable development. Yet, the cultural reform that Miller offers up as a solution to reaching these new ideals is misguided. These reforms must take place on a more local, or at least national level if they are to be effective and meaningful in the long run. The most substantial preventative measures should come from the Chinese government itself in order to protect their own country. The world simply can not continue to impose its capitalistic tendencies without regard to the consequences, which become especially pronounced when the social and cultural contexts are ignored. Far fetched policies and

disconnected leaders directly translates into environmental degradation and feeds the tendency to abuse natural resources.

Culturally embedded notions of sustainability are key, but they must come through lessons learned from traditional values that teach people to live in harmony with nature. China especially has these historical traditions, more so than other countries, which give them unique potential in comparison with the rest of the world. This is key to Miller's point because the West has enough difficulty separating church and state that they can not be expected to positively encourage religious beliefs in other countries, especially when they attempt to exploit said countries. The effects can be so detrimental that while Miller's point is notable as nationalist strategy, it just seems exceptionally unrealistic as a global strategy.

I agree with Rong's statement that sustainable development must be embraced from civic action and other local empowerment strategies. Some of the most common ideas tied to sustainable development involve localizing rather than globalizing. Going further still, while religious aspects may contribute to sustainability, very few people share the same viewpoint or interpretation of one religious aspect. It is hard to imagine a world that flows like that, and I wonder what Miller had in mind when he suggested this type of religious unity.



November 2, 2009  
Julia Kennedy

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I am also in agreement with the previous comments about Professor Miller's argument- religion bears an enormous influence over social norms and can help embed sustainability as a cultural value, but the argument that Chinese policymakers should turn to Taoism to achieve this cultural shift feels incomplete. I'd like to add to the discussion with a few ideas from Emily Yeh's forthcoming paper, Greening Western China: A Critical View.

Yeh's arguments against state-sponsored ecological modernization efforts in China both support and dispute Miller's concept. In terms of Yeh's critical political ecology framework, Miller is arguing for the state to adopt a program of training religious leaders to pass on environmental talking points that will access religious devotion and tie it to state-determined goals. Using her analysis, this type of environmental project turns the Taoist community into environmental subjects (pg. 6). As China's vice minister of environmental protection notes, the objective of environmental legislation cannot be reached if the goal is not accepted by the community. Similarly, when projects create environmental subjects, their interpretation of religious principles could easily not be anywhere near what is needed to truly move in the direction of sustainability. The potential for religious edicts to be implemented in an ineffective manner similar to the urban green communities that Yeh describes (e.g. urging residents to stay off lawns, adding potted plants, etc. pg. 7) is very high without further direction from policymakers.

Yeh's thesis can also support Miller's argument because, though possibly originating in the state, working with religious leaders to achieve environmental outcomes relies heavily on civil society relationships that can empower a community rather than disenfranchise it. If the policy is explained to the religious leaders and the implementation is left to them to determine with the community, there is a better chance that the projects will be designed in place-specific ways that take into account the social equity implications of the policy. Religious leaders become agents of the state who ensure that the programs are culturally appropriate and thereby increase the chance of the programs being effective. However, for this method to be effective, the training of religious leaders would need to cover a wide range of topics to ensure that the policy implementation directed by these leaders was in fact effective, and they would require resources to support follow-up work with the community to monitor implementation. In addition, Yeh points out the importance of the West in China's national environmental policies. Surely encouraging a culture of sustainability on the Tibetan Plateau would involve engaging Buddhist leaders as much as Taoist leaders, and the political difficulty of arguing for that policy seems insurmountable. If only Taoist religious leaders were included in the cultural/environmental program, the program would again be marginalizing at least one group.

Based on our past class discussions, I think that Miller's concept is one that is more appropriate to the US than China. Sustainability too often falls along partisan lines in our culture, and our political process and cultural discourse is greatly influenced by religious and cultural values. Engaging with religious leaders to emphasize the elements of sustainability that transcend politics could have an enormous impact on the culture of sustainability in the US. While the same cultural transition is necessary in China to achieve sustainable development, accessing culture through religion is just one of the many civil society networks that must be engaged.

November 2, 2009  
Angela Edwards

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I generally agree with Miller that religious leaders have the potential to further ecological sustainability goals, yet I also agree with Julia that this may be a more successful strategy in America than in China, considering the influence religion has in our culture and on our political system. However, as is the case with most environmental dilemmas, I believe that a variety of strategies is necessary for disseminating a message of sustainability to society and creating an environmental ethic within it.

Miller notes that "legislation is only effective when there is universal consent as to its validity." Additionally, in terms of legislative failures, Judith Shapiro writes in *Mao's War Against Nature* that "the post-Mao crisis of values has created an often-cynical society in which indifference to the public good has exacerbated problems with enforcement" (208). This indifference need not be countered by Daoism alone, as it may not provide a comprehensive understanding of how humans ought to relate to their natural environment. She adds, "Confucianism's pragmatism, by far the dominant tradition in China, might be well tempered through incorporating a Daoist sense of humility and understanding of humans as part of nature" and "Buddhism, with its vegetarian traditions and reverence for life, also has much to contribute to a society infamous for traditional medicines that rely on body parts of endangered species" (214).

Shapiro also points out some hopeful possibilities for effecting cultural change in China: civil society groups are beginning to flourish (209), and China's investment in environmental science education to all levels of school curriculums (211) is helping to create much more awareness of environmental issues. While returning to China's roots of Daoism could indeed be helpful to further environmental causes, other avenues of civil society and government would need to be explored to reach a larger percentage of the population.

November 2, 2009  
Daryush Assar, American University

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Miller, like Friedman, seems to be very optimistic in dealing with the issue of environmental sustainability. I feel that he has over-simplified this complex issue, by claiming that it can easily be fixed through religion. Unfortunately, I believe that it is not necessarily that easy.

Through history, Religion has been the root of many conflicts and whether you agree with me or not, I feel that if China would utilize Taoism to achieve a sustainable ecology, similar conflicts could arise. Taoism may be the main religion in China, but, similar to the US, they recognize Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism as well. Therefore, if one wants to achieve something through religion, the message would most certainly need to be sent across the board. If one begins preaching sustainability and the other does not agree then you have another conflict that needs to be solved.

I agree with Miller, that "without a cultural justification, sustainability is simply an empty word" but when it comes to religion, one always needs to walk on eggshells because it is a very sensitive subject.

November 2, 2009  
Mike McConnell

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Miller brings up an interesting concept, that the most effective way to change the cultural framework of a nation is to reach people through religion. I agree that religion can be a valuable tool to the 'sustainable lifestyle' movement, religion provides values and direction in the everyday lives of millions of people. If religious leaders were to start promoting more responsible and sustainable practices that can be easily adapted to their follower's lifestyles, I don't see how this could be a bad thing.

I would caution China's leadership not to place all of their efforts into the religious arena. While Religion does great things for some people, it alienates others. With so many different religious groups at odds with one another, we would not want to make one group cause another group's deterrent. The most important thing is that sustainability and responsibility become more of a regulating factor in the choices that people make. Some people are going to make these lifestyle changes because of religion, others because of science. Ultimately technological advances, policy, and legal reform will be the most important tools in shaping a new culture, but if religion can present sustainability as a key factor in everyday decision making, that couldn't hurt the cause.

James Miller is absolutely correct; there is a need for a social/cultural change if China is to have a successful green revolution. In fact, the same is true for all westernized nations. We (the West) have become preoccupied with making obscene amounts of money, and collecting obscene amounts of "stuff." Our material possessions give us financial, political and social power. Both

Europe and the United States have experienced significant growth (and gained a lot of power) through their free markets; now, China would like a chance to do the same.

Unfortunately, the declining state of our environment does not afford China the same opportunities that Europe and the U.S. enjoyed during their industrial revolutions. So, the Chinese must revert to a more traditional, less extravagant frame of mind. Miller points out that China's values conflict with sustainability. And so, he recommends that the government enhance the role of Taoism as a means to shift cultural norms and alter every day industrial practices.

The linking of core values (secular or otherwise) is vital to the global environmental movement. While I would be hesitant to endorse any government that blatantly supports a particular religion or values system, even for the sake of environmentalism, I would suggest that the government appeal to various religious groups/citizens by showing them how the health of the planet relates to their every day life. In other words, the Chinese government should not use Taoism to justify new policies. Rather, they should appeal to groups of people who already practice that religion. And they should find other ways to appeal to the many other interest groups. For example, how will a healthier planet affect farmers? How will better business practices enhance profitability and innovation for corporate executives? How will the green revolution improve national security? In a country as large and as diverse as China, Miller's contention that a change in culture can occur via a very specific set of beliefs and values seems a bit too optimistic. While spirituality and religion do affect some people's consideration of the planet (including my own), it is not practical to assume that Taoism or any religion has the type of appeal necessary for a green revolution.


Furthermore, Miller dismisses too many other components of a successful green revolution, such as self interest and science. As Yeh points out in her article "Greening Western China: A Critical View," the environmental movements requires analysis by multiple parties, with different areas of expertise (scholars, politicians, economists, scientists, etc.). While religion and philosophy ought to be part of China's environmental efforts, they should not depend on (or exploit) religious beliefs, which are too personal and too individual to be used to send a message to the general public.

I agree with many of those who have commented that culture is a multi-dimensional entity that cannot be appealed to simply through encouraging the emphasis of a particular religion's ideology. I see a few problems with focusing on Taoism as "resolution" to the environmental issues that China is currently facing. First, Taoism is only one of several religions practiced throughout China, and although it does have an ideology based on accommodating human existence around the existence of nature, it is not the only religion practiced in the state. To varying degrees the other religions in China also encourage some level of sensitivity to the health of the environment, but, in my opinion, it would be immoral to suggest that Taoism is superior to the other religions based solely on the current environmental issues facing China today. I also think that this idea gets increasingly messy if an outside force encourages China to emphasize particulars of a religious ideology in order to help ameliorate its problems. In this case, it is not only suggesting a superiority of one religion, but it also involves the political influence of external states on the internal religious affairs of another.

All that said, I do think that appealing to culture is important for dealing with the environmental issues. But, we must be cautious when we talk about a full spectrum societal shift. I see such a shift to be the exact same process, but with a different motivation, as the shift China experienced with the rise of Mao and his "battle against nature" philosophy. I say we must be cautious with such an approach because this same process led China to its current position now. But, with that in mind, it may suggest that an all-encompassing shift, utilizing a political ecology framework, may prove effective if the original shift of Mao was largely responsible for many of the environmental problems today; this approach may be able to flip these processes to work against the damage they created in the first place. Thus, it may be the actual utilization of a political ecology framework that would help China to deal with the problems that resulted from an alternative political framework. Still, I think that religion should be left out of the discussion, particularly when we are talking about a complete shift in a state-wide political framework.



 November 2, 2009  
Trey Lewis


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What James Miller seems to be advocating is another Cultural Revolution. This time, instead of imposing Confucianism as the ideal religion for the Chinese people, Miller decides that Taoism would be the ecological panacea China and the world needs. Going back and looking at the history of the Cultural Revolution and its effects on nature, one can see that a dogmatic religious approach towards nature seeks to benefit either nature through humanity or humanity through nature. In the end neither benefits as freedoms are suppressed and priorities are dictated from above.

China's development has indeed been very impressive. The ability to provide for 1.4 billion people without accumulating any financial debt and without war speaks to the power of the Chinese people when united behind a goal. China's rise has, conversely, accumulated a different sort of ecological debt in the high levels of brown and green pollution. China, despite the world's concern for its policies and the knowledge of the spillover effects of national decisions on the global environment, must make its own choice when it comes to the environment in order for real change to come about in a way that preserves the growing freedoms that many in China have fought and died to attain.

Mass government-run religious and cultural promotions are not the answer to this delicate situation. While religion is a powerful voice in communities, it is best to be seen as a partner to government and not as a tool to be wielded against the unwilling. Whenever religion becomes a weapon, such as in the Inquisition, the Intifada or in Mao's Cultural Revolution, nature, and the humans within it, will suffer.

 November 2, 2009  
Emily Angell, American University


2  I like this  
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I agree with previous posts that Mr. Miller's assessment that technology, policy and legislation combined with the right cultural framework is the recipe for a successful sustainable outcomes in China is overly simplistic and alarming in its call for the promotion of Taoism as the route to a green future. Although I recognize that a shift in ideological and cultural framework is a necessary component of sustainable policies, I believe that the means to achieving such a shift should necessitate further consideration of diversity, varying local conditions, and social equity.

Contained in Miller's article is the assumption that broader public support of sustainable initiatives (through a sustainably oriented cultural framework) will fuel needed policy shifts in China. However, as we have read in Emily Yeh's article "Greening Western China: A Critical View," that many celebrated environmental protection programs in China "have in many cases had the effect of further marginalizing already politically and economically marginalized citizens, while also producing only questionable environmental benefits." Before we wrestle with questions of how to influence the ideology of the public to support sustainable development policy, we must first evaluate the economic, social and environmental effectiveness of such policies.

Additionally, I do not find Mr. Miller's argument for a turn to Taoism as a means to achieving sustainable goals very compelling because it over-simplifies the vast complexities of sustainability in praxis. Though I do believe that the achievement of sustainable initiatives can be supported through ethic and moral appeals to tradition and religion, I believe that the greatest shift in "beliefs, habits, values and orientation" will be achieved through diverse approaches adopted by engaged citizens with agency to define their own values in relation to the broader goals of society and government. Dr. Shapiro in her book "Mao's War Against Nature" has suggested that the "crisis of values has created an openness to new ideas and philosophies and a reevaluation of Chinese traditions." Such traditions are broader than just Taoism and include Confucian pragmatism and Buddhist respect for all beings. But religion is by no means the only avenue for affecting the cultural framework. Scientific education, public awareness and a growing environmental civil society are working in conjunction with the political climate to bring about environmental awareness. In criticizing a lack of "cultural framework" we must not further marginalize groups through singular solutions, but rather respect the individual and collective agency employed by Chinese citizens to secure their sustainable future.

 November 2, 2009  
Heather Mannix, American University

1  I like this  
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Stephen Miller makes some interesting points on solutions for dealing with the growing environmental crisis in China, which also has lessons for the rest of the world. Miller notes that technology, policy changes and legislation all have a role to play in mitigating environmental

problems; however, they are largely ineffective without the legitimacy offered by cultural acceptance. He then offers religion as a major conduit for cultural persuasion. I agree with Miller that a culture of sustainability for China, and the rest of the world, is a necessary step for ensuring that policy changes are not only made, but enforced, and that encouraging a sense of stewardship, connection with nature and sustainable lifestyles within the framework of religion is a good way to reach out and connect with a large group of people.

However, while it can be very effective means of reaching a subset of the population, religion can only be part of the argument to protect and preserve the environment, as not all people respond to religious or spiritual influences. For some, the connection to nature and sense of stewardship can be, and needs to be, established outside the sphere of religion. Additionally, in Mao's War Against Nature, Shapiro notes that the Chinese people are affected by "a crisis of belief in socialism, the mistrust of the Communist Party leadership and their turn toward materialism, short-term profits, and apparent venality in human relations." This suggests that perhaps some will respond better to a more practical argument of responsible resource management – ensuring that the natural resources are there for future use. So, while cultural acceptance is an integral part of a movement toward sustainability, religious considerations should only be one part of a larger effort to connect with all people.



November 2, 2009  
Stacy Szczepanski, American University

1



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Miller suggests that promoting Taoism in China could lead to a more sustainable culture. He argues that a culture of ecological sustainability is necessary to support top-down approaches such as policy changes that are used to deal with the environmental crisis. In his view, a cultural framework is necessary to move sustainability from discourse to practice. I agree with Miller that social changes are necessary in order for China to truly pursue sustainable practices. Yet, additional suggestions for China's environmental future are noted by Judith Shapiro, Emily Yeh, and Thomas Friedman in their respective works "Mao's War on Nature," "Greening Western China: A Critical View" and "Hot, Flat, and Crowded."

Tackling environmental problems in China and around the world requires a set of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Thus, I disagree that promoting Taoism will be the solution to China's internalization of sustainable practices. Shapiro notes that Buddhist and Daoist traditions which also have core environmental values are also part of traditional Chinese culture. Yet, thus far, China has primarily focused on technological solutions to environmental problems. However, social movements will occur when people feel connected to the land and are inspired to protect environmental resources. Similar to Miller, Shapiro notes that an important part of societal change is the existence of an ethical framework. Thus, ecological ideals from Taoism, Buddhism, and Daoism could be combined and adopted as an ethical framework and incorporated into educational and societal programs and legislation. Incorporating ecological ideals into educational lessons will help young people to make decisions based on a set of environmental ethics. Thus, an ingrained framework of ecological ethics will help foster a culture of sustainability that as Miller emphasizes, is necessary for China to be ecologically and economically prosperous.

Furthermore, Chinese culture is still dealing with the negative effects of the Mao regime's "war against nature." Thus, in addition to educational efforts, citizens' trust in government policies can be regained by giving people additional freedoms such as free speech and the power to innovate (Shapiro and Yeh). With 1/5 of the world's population, the Chinese population has an enormous intellectual potential to develop new solutions to help mitigate environmental problems. The educational and intellectual reforms will indeed take time to be formed and to catch on, however the impacts will have profound positive effects on Chinese society. Therefore, it is essential that action is taken now by both Chinese citizens and government officials to start these reform processes.



November 2, 2009  
Liz Tully

3



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Professor Miller's post has effectively provoked very probing discussion about the implications of using various social and political networks to improve China's (and the rest of the world's) sustainable development prospects. Impressively, his post has generated contemplative and complex responses with only a few suggestive remarks.

This goes to show how complicated the relationship is between politics and culture across the world and how understanding politics, religion, and culture through any of those lenses excites endless interpretations and ideas.

I agree with Prof Miller's opinion that legislation is most effective when there is a consensus among

its subjects that it is valid and appropriate. While I do agree that religious leaders can play a valuable role in communicating the validity of environmental legislation and environmental awareness in lifestyle choices, I feel strongly that other forms of public education are as vital or more so for the cultural justification of sustainability that Prof Miller is speaking of. The point that a cultural indoctrination of sustainability is necessary to realize sustainable lifestyles and policy and the role religions could have in this indoctrination is compelling. Many cultures were at some point shaped by religious tenets. And culture does influence our perception of the environment, how to use it, how and when to value it, and the amount of time spent understanding ourselves and lives in relation to it. Clearly, sustainable development must be culturally understood and embraced. Since religion does inform many aspects of culture, it can have an important role to play for religious communities. I think religious leaders should be incorporated into information dissemination mission of sustainable environmental and economic policy and of lifestyle behaviors. But I see religious leaders to be just as important as any community leaders like teachers and elected officials to fulfill this effort of creating an ecological culture.

Taoism is one example of a religion that can easily highlight the environmental values already incorporated in its teachings. I'm not sure if Prof. Miller is suggesting that Taoism should be the religion that China and its leaders look to in order to embed an environmental ethic into its followers, but as an example it certainly conjures up many other examples of religions in China and in the world that could also be effective venues for environmental education and concern. Obviously, using Taoism to support ecologically coherent lifestyles in China would only directly affect those who practice Taoism. Therefore I feel strongly that incorporating religion into the movement towards sustainable societies with solid environmental policies must extend to as many religions as possible in order to reach more communities. Again, this effort would only create change directly among the constituents of the religious leaders involved in reinvigorating the environmental values of their faiths' teachings. If it is suggested that religious leaders should underscore the environmental values of their religion and translate them to the modern lives of their community, then the same must be expected of elected officials and teachers. Besides the fact that religion is not shared or participated in universally across a nation or across the world, other social and political networks must be used to espouse environmental values into modern day living because true environmental stewardship is pervasive throughout all aspects of life. If it religious leaders can evaluate their teachings and responsibilities for environmental relevance, so can our elected officials and teachers. I will also say that if Prof. Miller advises the West to encourage China's government to view religion as a potential ally rather than a problem to be managed, that the West and its governments would do well to take its own advice. All civic community leaders should be seen as allies to achieve sustainable societies. The potential of religious communities might often be overlooked which makes the content of this post an interesting reminder about the value of religion and its past and current effects on culture.

Shapiro may agree that a consensus is needed for effective environmental legislation as she notes that even the most repressed peasants under Maoism found ways to resist, to the best of their abilities, policies that threatened their freedoms. On the other hand, Shapiro would not agree that strengthening religious espousal of environmental ideals would be a guaranteed method for creating an ecological culture as she cites examples in her book that clearly "warn against an easy equation between beliefs and behavior" when state and/or socially embraced environmental ideals still produce an environmentally degrading society. Yeh would also likely agree with the potential value of reinforcing the environmental values of religion but would strongly advise against the government partnering with one religion or limiting the approach for culturally embedding sustainable practices to one method or venue that is conducive to one particular community of citizens.



November 3, 2009  
Abdus Salam, American University

2



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While I am generally in agreement with the idea that religion must be an ally while addressing environmental issues, I am not entirely convinced that Taoism informs, even at a minimally significant level, Chinese cultural life. In the major cities of China, people seem to aspire to Western cultural norms rather than norms of Taoism. This is generally the trend across many of the major cities in developing countries. In recent years, I have often read that Chinese conceptions of beauty, for instance, have fallen in line with Western ideas. So, my point simply is that making religion an ally in addressing environmental issues in China may not necessarily produce drastic change.

Having said this, there is much merit in trying to influence the practices of people rather than simply attempting to produce an environmentally sound theory. Today's philosophy seems to increasingly veer towards the position that this is a better approach. So, religion and other mores that inform practice definitely deserve increased attention.



I agree with James Miller's assertion that environmentally oriented technologies, policies, and legislation are insufficient to address ecological issues. Restoring ecological balance must also be derived from a shift in the way that humans view the environment, drastic reductions in consumption, and a renewed respect for the natural world. Harnessing the power and reach of religious institutions may be an effective mechanism in the widespread dissemination of an ecological sensibility, which can play a crucial role in altering unsustainable behavior and attitudes. Religious leaders play a powerful role in influencing vast numbers of people across the world and most spiritual traditions explore the interface between humanity and nature. Therefore, world leaders should encourage religious leaders to adopt sustainability as an imperative moral extension of spirituality. Miller's assertion that "the majority of the world's cultures are steeped in centuries of religious beliefs and values that pay little or no regard to the environment as a topic of moral concern" is accurate in the sense that religious interpretation has not traditionally emphasized the ways in which humans should interact with the environment. However, most spiritual texts and traditions do in fact promote a more sustainable, harmonious relationship between nature and humanity. Religious leaders should actively encourage followers to adopt behaviors that are more amenable to ecological sustainability as such values are crucial to the fundamental principles defining most religions.

Miller's hope that encouraging the Chinese government to embrace religious practice and promoting the ecocentric philosophy of Taoism will lead to an increase in ecological sensibility is flawed in several ways. First, he is overestimating the role of religion in contemporary Chinese culture. In her book, *Mao's War Against Nature*, Judith Shapiro argues that a "crisis of belief" afflicts many Chinese and a general sense of disillusionment with the government may negate any gains associated with the state-led promotion of spiritually derived values of sustainability. Taoism supports government by inaction, which contrasts sharply with China's emphasis on centralized state power. Many Chinese may identify more with Confucian traditions, which support a more utilitarian view of environmental resources. Moreover, individual identification with religious groups represents an extremely potent connection that has been used and manipulated throughout history as a means of promoting political agendas. According to Emily T. Yeh, the ways in which people perceive environmental programs greatly influence their relative levels of success. If the power and reach of religion are to be harnessed as means of promoting environmental health, it must not be achieved through top-down strategies at the expense of individual rights.

Overall, efforts to protect the global environment cannot be achieved through piecemeal alterations to dominating systems of production, consumption, and government. The social paradigms that shape how people view the world must fundamentally shift and the application of traditional religious values and moral structures can prove useful in promoting an global ecological sensibility.