

China's Determined March Towards the "Ecological Civilization"

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Featured image: Ancient Xidi Village in China

There is no time for long introductions. The world is, possibly heading for yet another catastrophe. This one, if we, human beings will not manage to prevent it, could become our final.

The West is flexing its muscle, antagonizing every single country that stands on its way to total domination of the Planet. Some countries, including Syria, are attacked directly and mercilessly. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people are dying.

Political and potentially military disaster is simultaneously 'complemented' by the ecological ruin. Mainly Western multi-national companies have been plundering the world, putting profit over people, even over the very survival of the human species.

'Political correctness' is diluting the sense of urgency, and there is plenty of hypocrisy at work: while, at least in the West and Japan, people are encouraged to recycle, to turn off the lights in empty rooms and not to waste water, in other parts of our Planet, entire islands, nations and continents are being logged out by the Western corporations, or destroyed by unbridled mining. The governments of the West's 'client states' are getting hopelessly corrupt in the process.

Western politicians see absolutely no urgency in all that is taking place around the world, or more precisely - they are paid not to see it.

So, are we now dealing with the thoroughly hopeless scenario? Did the world go mad? Is it ready to get sacrificed for the profit of the very few? Are people simply going to stand passively, watching what is happening around them, and die, as their world goes literally up in flames?

It appeared so, until few months ago.

Then, one of the oldest cultures on Earth, China, stood up and said

"No! There are different ways to go forward. We could all benefit from the progress, without cannibalizing, and fully destroying our Planet."

China, led by President Xi, accelerated implementation of the concept of so-called Ecological Civilization, eventually engraving it into the constitution of the country.

A man who did tremendous work in China, working tirelessly on the Ecological Civilization concept in both China and in the United States, **John Cobb Jr.**, has been, for years, a friend and close comrade of mine.

A 93-year-old Whiteheadian philosopher (and many believe, one of the most important living philosophers), one of the most acknowledged Christian progressive topologists, and self-proclaimed 'supporter of Revolution', John Cobb's is a brave 'alternative' and optimistic voice coming from the United States.



Andre Vltchek and John Cobb Jr.

We first met on a bus from Pyongyang to DMZ, in DPRK, several years ago, and became close friends, presently working on a book and a film together.

In this difficult, extremely dangerous, but also somehow hopeful time for our planet, it is clear that John Cobb's voice should be heard by many.

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China's Growing Commitment to Eco-Civ

I recalled our meeting in Claremont, when John expressed worries that China and its leadership could go 'either way', in regard to the "Ecological civilization", possibly even against it. Inside China and her leadership, there were apparently voices defending 'pure economic growth' approach. Now the Chinese Parliament has written the goal of ecological civilization into the national constitution.

I wanted to know what does it mean, practically? Is there a reason to celebrate?

John replied via email:

“Something like fifteen years ago, the Chinese Communist Party wrote the goal of an ecological civilization into its constitution. Although the formulation is remarkable, the motivation is not hard to understand. The Party was responding to the distress of hundreds of millions of Chinese who longed for clean air and blue skies. To maintain the popularity of the party, it had to assure the people that it shared their concerns. Everyone agreed that lessening pollution was a good thing.

Nevertheless, the phrase meant more than just trying to minimize the ecological damage done by rapid economic growth. It expressed an understanding that the natural world was constituted of ecologies rather than just a collection of individual things. And it clearly indicated the desirability of human activity fitting into this natural world rather than replacing it.

Many who supported this goal, however, did not suppose that announcing it committed China to major changes in the present. Many have argued that China’s first task was to modernize, meaning especially industrialize, and become a wealthy nation. Then it would have the luxury of attending to the natural environment. Few, if any, thought it meant that China would turn away from the goal of economic growth to pursue something different.



Communist Victory in Beijing, China

However, Chinese leaders did recognize that simply postponing the work for clear skies and a healthy environment would not work. The nation needed to work on economic growth and a healthy natural environment simultaneously. It began evaluating the success of provincial governments by their achievements in these two distinct realms. Growth goals were set below what would be possible, so that it could be channeled in less environmentally harmful directions. Experiments with ecovillages received encouragement.

The talk of moving toward an ecological civilization also encouraged reflection about “civilization” alongside “market.” That supported those Chinese who were concerned that the narrow concern for wealth at all costs was not healthy for human society. Marxism had always emphasized economic matters, but it was concerned to move society away from competition toward cooperation. It was always concerned with the distribution of goods, so that the poor would be benefited, and workers would be empowered. The idea of recovering traditional Chinese civilizational values gained in acceptance.

The extent to which the health of the natural environment and cultural goals gained status as policy goals bothered some party members. For them China's wealth and power were crucial. An observer could not be sure that the extent to which the goal of ecological civilization was broadening the aims of government would continue. Leadership is subject to change every five years.

However, the changes at the recent Party congress tended to strengthen commitment to ecological civilization. President Xi, who has been central to the moves toward ecological civilization was given another five years. He and others reiterated the goal and affirmed steps in its direction. Now it seems likely that in the next five years he will not be a "lame-duck" president since the limitation to two terms has been removed.

To reinforce the Chinese commitment, the Parliament has written the goal of ecological civilization into the national constitution. Since the national government is regularly guided by the Party, this may not seem to make much practical difference. But the way it occurred does make clear that the nation, on the whole, is not resentful. The Chinese people do not feel that the Party's commitment is oppressive or foolish. We can have considerable confidence that China as a nation is genuinely committed and that the people share a hope for becoming an ecological civilization. Predicting the future is never safe, but as these matters go, we can have confidence that China is committed. Given the likelihood that it will supersede the United States as the global leader, this can give us grounds for hope."

John Cobb's Role in China

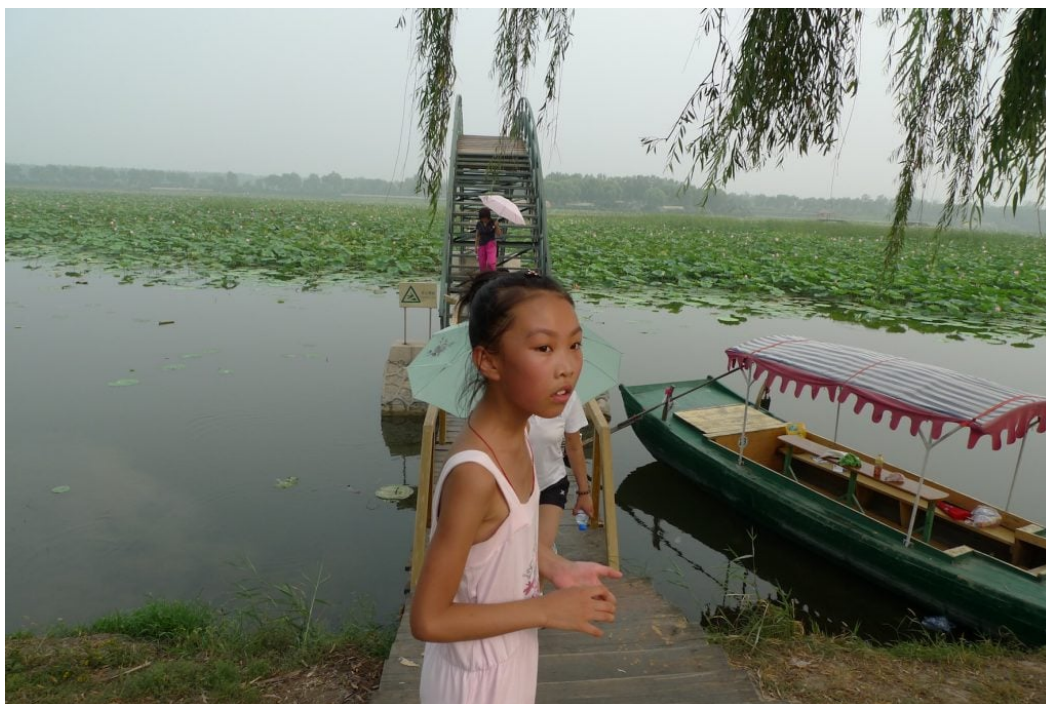
John Cobb is a well-known figure in the PRC. His thoughts are having great impact on an influential group of Chinese leaders. But how would he, personally, summarize his involvement in the "Ecological Civilization" project? What impact did he have, personally, on what is happening in China, in this particular field?

"Through most of my life, the last thing I anticipated was to have a role in China. As a Protestant theologian, any hope for influence went in quite different directions. Although my theology is deeply shaped by the prophetic tradition of ancient Judaism, and I understand Marx also to have been deeply informed by that tradition, I did not expect Chinese Communists to recognize that kinship. Yet in the end, I consider that, through a remarkable sequence of chances, my role in China has been the most important part of my life. I will first describe my trajectory, then the trajectory of China, and then the wholly "improbable" intersection.

In my studies at the University of Chicago in the late nineteen forties, made possible by the GI bill, I was introduced to **Alfred North Whitehead**. Over the years, I was more and more impressed by the way his "philosophy of organism" answered my questions and provided me the holistic vision that I craved, one quite contrary to the mechanist and materialist thinking that dominated American education and culture.

In the late sixties, I was awakened to the fact that the dominant modern culture was leading the world to self-destruction, and my attachment to Whitehead, as one who offered a far more promising alternative, was confirmed and deepened. Meanwhile interest in any alternative to mechanism was fading in American universities. Together with **David Griffin**, I seized an opportunity in 1973 to create a center to keep Whitehead's thought alive and display its relevance to the crises of our time. This Center for Process Studies has sponsored conferences and lectures and publications

displaying how Whitehead's organic and processive thought provides a more promising pattern of thinking in many fields. Ecological concerns played a large role throughout. Although many individual scientists and professionals worked with us, the universities tightened their commitment to the modern vision we were trying to get beyond. We sometimes called ourselves postmodernists, but when that term was given wide currency by French intellectual deconstruction of modernity, David Griffin began calling us "constructive postmodernists."



Lotus lake and Chinese girl - ecological paradise

By the opening of the twentieth century, thoughtful Chinese saw that the Western colonial powers together with Japan were nibbling away at China and that classical Chinese culture was unable to compete with the West in science, technology, and military power. To maintain Chinese independence, China must modernize. It adopted the dominant Western form of modernity, bourgeois capitalism. The suffering of the poor led many to seek a better form of modernity in Marxism, and during and after World War II the Marxists replaced bourgeois democracy with rule by the Communist Party.

Mao Tse Tung made a serious effort to end China's class society in what was called then "Cultural Revolution." This evoked so intense an opposition from the urban middle class, that it was a painful failure, never repeated. When the Communist Party repudiated this Marxist goal, what was left was rule by the party and commitment to rapid modernization as the road to national wealth.

Chinese intellectuals were not comfortable with this total commitment to the modern in view of the deconstruction of the modern by French intellectuals. Some of them followed the French in calling themselves postmodernists, but the French postmodernists gave little guidance in relation to China's biggest problem with modernization — the pollution and degradation of the environment. When they discovered that there was another form of "postmodernism" that made positive proposals for change and gave a great deal of attention to the natural world, many of

them were interested. One Chinese postmodernist, **Zhihe Wang**, came to Claremont to complete his studies, and it was his leadership that led to the intersection of developments in China with my life. He decided that he could be most effective living in the United States and frequently visiting China. His wife, **Meijun Fan** left a prestigious professorship in Beijing to work with him. As a result of their effective introduction of “process thought” to China, thirty-five universities established centers focusing on the relevance of Whitehead’s thought to a wide range of topics, such as education, psychology, science and values, the legal system, and so forth.

Meanwhile, partly, I assume, to assuage the distress of many urbanites with the pollution of the air, the Communist Party wrote into its constitution the goal of becoming an “ecological civilization.” Because of the reputation of the Chinese leadership in Claremont, they were encouraged to hold conferences on this topic here, primarily for Chinese scholars. These gave me and other American constructive postmodernists an opportunity to participate in shaping the meaning of the initially rich and suggestive, but rather vague, term. This has probably been our major contribution.

There has been one very important shift in Chinese policy due to the commitment to “ecological civilization.” As part of its goal of modernization, China planned to industrialize agriculture. At many of the conferences here and at others in China, we argued that China could not build an ecological civilization on an industrial agriculture. The Communist Party was persuaded to shift its policies from the continuing depopulation of rural China to the development of the thousands of villages that were slated for destruction. Policies have changed, and in 2016 for the first time, more people moved from cities to countryside than from countryside to cities. Development of villages has been emphasized along with the goal of ecological civilization in last fall’s crucial meetings of the Communist Party. And the Chinese parliament has written the goal of ecological civilization into the national constitution. It seems highly probable that this important shift in Chinese society will endure.

Obviously, the shift was primarily due to the work of many Chinese. However, harsh criticism by Americans of the consequences of industrializing agriculture in the United States played a role. Again, my voice was only one of many. Partly, no doubt, because of my age, I am given far more credit than I deserve. But I am very proud of whatever contribution I made to this shift that affects hundreds of millions of Chinese and gives some concrete meaning to “ecological civilization”.

Centralized Power

In many ways, China became the leader, when it comes to ecology, as well as combining traditional culture with modernity. It is determined to build the entire civilization around its ecological and cultural concerns. It appears that in the future, the ‘markets’ and financial considerations may play important but secondary role. Is it mainly possible because of the centralized/Communist nature of the Chinese political and economic system (including the central planning)?

“I have neither study nor experience qualifying me to address this question. But I still have opinions; so, I’ll share them.

Clearly in China it has been the leadership of the central government that has set the course, done the planning, and implemented what it planned. For those of us who

believe the world needs urgently to move toward ecological civilization, this has worked well. Prior to the meetings last fall, I remained unsure about whether everything depended on a particular leader who might be replaced. That he emerged from the fall events with increased power was reassuring, especially because he strongly expressed determination to implement steps toward achieving the civilization China and the world needs.

There was still the possibility that representatives of other factions in the Communist Party, who sought to replace Xi, might treat him as a “lame duck.” Now that the impossibility of a third term has been removed, that danger also is gone. An extended period of leadership can probably make some policies so identified with the nation that they will continue even if a successor is not personally committed to the goal of ecological civilization.

All of this is to say that centralized power is currently working in a remarkably promising way not paralleled by other countries with less centralized political power.

Some European countries achieved a considerable move toward ecological civilization earlier than China. That they are not currently leading may be because they are already farther along on the needed trajectory. They have made significant desirable policy changes without centralized power. In these countries, the public as whole is well informed and capable of making wise decisions. Governments are sufficiently democratic that they express the public desires. In some cases, commitment to sustainable practices and meeting the basic needs of all citizens has become the “common sense” of the people sufficiently that it is likely not to be radically abandoned by changing officials. It was impressive that, when Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Accords, there was very little interest in withdrawal in Europe, even though the reasons for withdrawal applied equally there. Apparently, the corporate world in Europe has adjusted to new needs and expectations as it has not in the United States.

Even so, I have more confidence in endurance in China with its centralized control than in European countries more directly subject to popular opinion. Thus far European countries have been fairly prosperous. Pollution control has not led to unemployment or economic immiseration. Thus, the level of commitment to ecological needs has not been seriously tested.

In contrast, the need to accept large numbers of refugees has been sufficient to weaken consensus on a range of issues. It is not hard to imagine that corporations that have thus far been cooperative with good policies might take advantage of dissident public opinion to seek the kinds of changes that the United States is currently experiencing. These corporations often control the media and thus can shape public opinion to support their ends.



Wuxi - medieval ecological village

As I compare China's success in giving serious attention to the well-being of its natural environment and needy citizens with that of European countries, my reason for betting on China is that I have some confidence that it will maintain governmental control of finance and of corporations generally. If it does this, it can also control the media. Thus, it has a chance of making financial and industrial corporations serve the national good as perceived by people not in their service. Less centralized governments are less able to control the financial and other corporations whose short-term interests may conflict with the common good.

Of course, the concentration of power in countries like China does not guarantee the continuation of governmental service of the common good. There is an old adage in the West: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I think the Communist Party in China works hard to socialize its members to resist corruption. I think it has been largely successful.

My hero, Jesus, asserted that no one can serve God and money. If we understand that God's desire is for the common good, we can translate, no one can serve both money and the common good. I think that at the present time, the Chinese Communist Party is more successful in cultivating a commitment to the common good than are the churches in the West. That may be more important than the question of how centralized the power may be.

Commitment to the Common Good

I wrote to John that during our recent encounter, he stated that one of the reasons why China succeeded in so many fields, is because it can count on many people in its leadership, who are truly concerned about the well-being of their country. This fully coincided with my own experience that I gained in the PRC. But how does John see the West? How different is it in the West? Is the Western leadership constructed on thoroughly different principles? He replied immediately:

"Near the end of my answer to the previous topic I made the statement that I believed the Chinese Communist Party was more successful in eliciting concern for the wellbeing of China and all its people than the Western churches were in

eliciting commitment to the common good. For many Christians, this is surprising. Christians have tended to think that we need belief in God to ground our ethical commitments.

No one supposes that a theistic ethic is the only way that people can be socialized with respect to action. Earthly rulers have often considered their will as the grounds of law and ethics. The deepest commitment should be to the ruler and hence to advance the ruler's wishes. But from the Christian point of view, true ethics must transcend obedience to political power. Might does not make right.

How to live can also be determined by tribal or national culture. This often overlaps with obeying the ruler, but it can even conflict with that. The interpreters of the culture may be identified as priests or as sages.

Philosophers have sometimes attempted to ground ethics in a purely rational way. Kant developed a "categorical imperative." Whether that is truly free from particular cultural shaping is questionable, but many still think so. Certainly, it may be supported in more than one culture.

For theists, none of these forms of ethics really work. For some of them the alternative is belief that the Creator is also the giver of law, and rewards those who obey in a life after death if not here and now, and punishes those who disobey.

Other theists reject this legalism and emphasize that we owe our being and all that is good in our lives to the Creative and Redeeming God. This God loves all people and seeks the good of all. Our grateful response is to serve those whom God loves, namely, at least, all human beings, and especially those whose needs are greatest.

For many theists, right and wrong are so bound up with God that when they hear that Marx was an atheist, they assume he had no ethics. So, for me to say that Marx's followers do a better job of evoking commitment to the common good than do Western theists strikes some as implausible. They think that if there is no God to serve, one will serve something less than God, and therefore less than the "common" good. Many theists assume that if one does not serve God one is likely to look out only for one's own good. This assumption is foundational to the academic discipline of economics.

In fact, however, Marx derived from Hegel a sense of a movement in history that should be served. It is a movement that works for a classless society in which the needs of all are met. To work for that society is certainly a way of serving the common good. I believe this sense of participating in a process that works for good is more convincing to many people than serving what has been more conventionally called "God". The percentage of Western people who take seriously belief in a God who calls us to serve the common good is probably less than the percentage of Chinese who understand themselves to work with the dialectic of history to overcome the class society that leaves so many abused and oppressed.

Neither Christianity nor Marxism has a history of great moral achievement. Both need to be honest about their failures. I will comment on Western Christianity in the modern world. Two Western developments have greatly weakened it. One is the development of science on the basis of a metaphysics that systematically excludes any possible role for God. The other is the development of capitalism which assumes and celebrates individual self-interest as the one all-controlling motivation. Even faithful churchgoers are likely to be influenced by both of these developments. Among the actual determinants of behavior, theism now plays a small role.

Among Americans, the “American exceptionalism” into which the school system socializes youth plays a larger role. It can lead to heroic acts thought to be in the service of the nation, and even to great passion for the preservation or restoration of the natural beauty with which the nation is endowed. But its primary function is to persuade Americans to accept much profoundly evil activity on the part of their country by assuring them that in the long run this will enable others to share in the great benefits of Americanism.

I am attributing to the American educational system the inculcation of American exceptionalism. However, it officially eschews even this value. Its goal is to be “value-free,” which means in practice, in the service of money. The whole culture celebrates the value of being rich. Economic theory is the national ideology. That Americans are becoming increasingly nihilistic is the natural result of a nihilistic system of schooling.

Sadly, China is going all too far in copying this nihilistic schooling. My view is that the commitment of the government to Marxism has not been allowed to shape the academic curriculum, but that it does provide some important values to supplement the curriculum. And, alongside the general culture, in the Communist Party, a substantial number of people are socialized in Marxist thought and values. It is because Marx has more influence in China than Jesus has in the West, that the chances of China to lead the world toward salvation are better than the chances of the West to do so.

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This article was originally published on New Eastern Outlook.

Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. Three of his latest books are his tribute to [“The Great October Socialist Revolution”](#) a revolutionary novel [“Aurora”](#) and a bestselling work of political non-fiction: [“Exposing Lies Of The Empire”](#). View his other books [here](#). Watch [Rwanda Gambit](#), his groundbreaking documentary about Rwanda and DR Congo and his film/dialogue with Noam Chomsky [“On Western Terrorism”](#). Vltchek presently resides in East Asia and the Middle East, and continues to work around the world. He can be reached through his [website](#) and his [Twitter](#). He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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