

## CAN HUMANITY SURVIVE THE ANTHROPOCENE? IT DEPENDS ON WHO WE THINK WE ARE

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The question in the title is prompted by our failure to deal with the climate and environmental crises. This in turn derives in part from a dubious but widespread idea of who we are as human beings: that we are basically free and independent individuals in economic competition with others for all the satisfactions that late capitalism offers. In recent times the libertarian Titans of Big Tech have added a strong dose of Cartesian mind-body dualism to the formula. More beneficial ideas of who we are can be found in numerous indigenous tradition, and especially in Chinese philosophy, which understands human beings as relatives in a dynamic network of interactions with our fellow humans, the biosphere, and the powers of Heaven and Earth. Together with corresponding views in our own philosophical tradition, these ideas provide good grounds for a dialogue with China about cooperating to resolve our environmental predicament.

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– Relational Ontology – Xi Jinping

Everything, o monks, is burning, burning with the fire of craving.  
Bhikkus, the All is aflame, enflamed with the fires of hatred.  
All things, o priests, are on fire, on fire with the flames of delusion.  
Monks, all the senses are burning, ensuing feelings are on fire.  
*(Ādittapariyāya Sutta)*

Those are excerpts from the Buddha's well-known "Fire Sermon," which he delivered to an assembly of a thousand monks who had come from a cult of fire worshipers – hence all the fire imagery in discussing the human experience. The year 2021 was a record year for wildfires world-wide, with unprecedented conflagrations in countries all over the world. The war-caused fires burning in Ukraine right now are not unrelated to those wildfires. Russia is the world's leading exporter of natural gas, the second largest exporter of oil, and the third largest of coal. And if we in Europe had weaned

ourselves from those Russian supplies decades ago – when it was already clear that burning fossil fuels was disrupting the climate – Putin could not have afforded his war against Ukraine. And so, the quicker we end our dependence on fossil fuels, the less able he'll be to start another war.

I'm beginning with fire because the consequences of our pyromania as a species are now severe enough to prompt the question of my title: Can we human beings survive the Anthropocene, the new epoch of the Earth System that we have brought about? The natural sciences – and common sense, if we think about it – make it clear that as a species we are totally dependent for our survival on the biosphere and other Earth Systems. If we burn up our resource base, we extinguish ourselves as a species. It could well turn out, in the most tragic of ironies, that after setting its stamp so firmly upon the Earth as to give its name to a new geological epoch, the human race will bring itself to a lethal finish by disrupting the natural systems on which its existence depends. The pyromaniac Anthropos might well put an end to the Anthropocene.

### **I. Where We Are Now**

Let's begin by considering what's behind our pyromania – because, like the audience for the Buddha's fire sermon, we too are fire worshipers, even if covertly. When early humans learned the uses of fire, it made them more human: *homo pyrotechnicus*. Human-made fire was at first restricted by the amount of fuel available, and then expanded with the advent of agriculture and the ability to grow vegetation for burning. But with "industrial fire" to power steam engines and steam pumps, modern miners for fuel could delve deeper into the earth than ever before, reaching back in geological time to extract fossil biomass that was deposited during the Carboniferous Period. We're burning more than ever before, though the fires are now hidden from our sight in the furnaces of fossil fuel power stations.

It's no wonder that our relentless burning of coal, releasing energy that came in from the sun over 300 million years ago and emitting massive amounts of carbon, should now be throwing Earth's energy balance off by filling the atmosphere with heat-trapping gases. According to the latest reports from the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, the sixth series since 1990, this human activity is having a potentially catastrophic effect on the Earth System (IPCC 2023). These reports highlight two crucial issues: the probable increase in global heating over the next few decades, and the risk of going over several climate "tipping points."

The problem is that we've already pumped so much greenhouse gas into the climate system that, even if we drastically reduce our emissions almost immediately, we're still likely to produce a temperature increase of at least 1.5°C over pre-industrial times by the middle of this century. And if the year 2022 was an indication of how things

are at an increase of around 1.1°C, just think of what a 50% increase will bring. In complex systems like the Earth System such increases have exponential effects, so the extreme weather is likely to be *several times* worse than now. Not a happy prospect.

Climate scientists have been complaining for decades that the IPCC reports consistently *underestimate* the risks of going beyond several climate tipping points, but the latest series finally warns of the dangers. There isn't room here to discuss the grim consequences of overshooting, but the growing literature on Earth Systems' tipping points is easily accessible.<sup>1</sup> And even if we were able to somehow resolve the climate crisis, continued *economic growth* will make the Earth uninhabitable in any case. To preserve the integrity of the biosphere that sustains human existence, we have to put an end to soil depletion, deforestation, overfishing, chemical pollution, and destruction of species and natural ecosystems. But that's another story, one too long to tell here.

The climate situation is made worse by the fact that the big banks are continuing to lend billions to the fossil fuel concerns, which are already enjoying obscenely huge profits, so that they can develop *new* sources from which to extract more carbon for burning. The biggest offenders are (in order of lending volume as of 2022): JPMorgan Chase, Citibank, Bank of America, ICBC (China), BNP Paribas (France), Bank of China, Wells Fargo, HSBC (UK), Barclays (UK), Industrial Bank (China).<sup>2</sup> A review by *The Guardian* has identified no fewer than 195 “carbon bombs” under development – defined as “gigantic oil and gas projects that would each result in at least a billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions over their lifetimes” (Carrington 2022). All the governments involved (Australia, Canada, the Middle East, Russia, the United States) pledged at the Paris Climate Accords in 2015 to reduce their carbon emissions drastically – and yet they're now approving the development of all these projects that are *guaranteed* to fry the planet.

To neutralise such ruthless forces, we need not only judicious action, but also political *activism*. Because if we in the overdeveloped world, immersed in the consumerist dream of endless abundance on a finite planet, fail to change our lives, the consequent scarcity of resources will *oblige* us to reduce our consumption. Is that really how we want to live? Lives of deprivation and violent strife, assailed and battered by the formidable powers of Nature? Alternatively, we could change our ways now, and live far more modestly, with less environmental destruction and jeopardy to ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lenton (2019).

<sup>2</sup> See Niranjana (2023).

## II. Two Ancient Views on How We Are

The idea of the Buddha's Fire Sermon is that our experience as human beings is ordinarily permeated by the "fires" of craving, hatred, and delusion, which keep us bound to cycles of desire and frustration. As long as we think of ourselves as independent agents striving to fulfil their desires, we are bound to be frustrated. But if we realise our actual interdependence, we can escape those cycles and find a Middle Way between clinging and detachment, indulgence and asceticism.

In a later Buddhist scripture, *The Lotus Sutra*, human beings are likened to the children of a rich man whose huge mansion is burning down, but they're so joyfully absorbed in the games they're playing that he can't persuade them to escape from the burning house (*Lotus Sutra*, ch. 3). But when the father then tells them there are far more attractive playthings outside the mansion, which he is happy to give to them, they all rush out of the house in high anticipation. They find a selection of animal-drawn carts (the equivalent of sports cars for modern children), each of which is emblematic of a particular school of Buddhist teaching. The burning house is the world of everyday experience, which generates desires and craving. We humans are like those children in the story, beings in whom the flame of desire burns so bright as to blind us to the risks of unrestrained satisfaction of desires. Humanity needs to grow up and wake up (the Buddha's name means "the awakened one"). Can't we follow one of those Buddhist schools by moderating our desires, becoming aware of the consequences of our actions, and taking responsibility for them?

Modern western civilisation is built on the basis of fire, on burning fossil fuels. Unwittingly, we belong to the cult of Prometheus, the Titan in ancient Greek myth who stole fire from the Gods to give it to humans. Let's understand myths in the spirit of the philosopher Sallustius, who wrote about them: "These things never happened, *but always are*" (Sallustius 1926, sec. IV) – meaning that myths are always playing out behind or beneath what humans do. In addition to fire, Prometheus also gave us the stolen arts of agriculture and animal husbandry, house- and ship-building, as well as techniques for *mining*. These arts are *technai* in Greek, which is the root of our word "technology," and their purpose is to make human life more comfortable.

Plato's discussion of the Prometheus myth (*Protagoras* 321c – d) suggests significant limitations to the gifts that the Titan bestowed upon us: while Prometheus was able to steal "technical wisdom" from the gods, "humanity did not get the political wisdom, for that was in the keeping of Zeus." Driven by the spirit of Prometheus, humanity has become supremely skilled in the technical arts of survival and comfort creation (while forgetting that these skills are gifts and stolen goods); but it lacks the *political* arts that would integrate technological expertise with the art of living well together in diverse communities.

And let us not forget that Prometheus, whose sacrilegious theft set in train so much technical ingenuity, suffered dreadful punishment for his crime. Zeus had the Titan nailed to a rock on a mountain-top for a thousand years, with an eagle coming every day to devour his liver – which would regenerate overnight, to be ready for another bout of torment in the morning. We humans do of course need to use fire, and build houses, and practice agriculture in order to survive, but we now need to employ these techniques *sustainably*. If instead, as protégés of Prometheus, we continue to let his spirit drive us to excess in burning fossil fuels, treating soil with fertilisers and crops with pesticides, and industrially producing meat from animals, it would be naïve not to expect some kind of painful backlash.

### **III. Libertarian Individualist Ideology**

One reason for the severity of the climate crisis is that a small group of neoliberal economists allied with some very rich people launched a covert “War of Ideas” (their term) to persuade the inhabitants of the free world that we are basically consumers in a capitalist system that’s guaranteed to satisfy our material desires. The story begins in London, shortly after the Second World War, but with an Austrian economist from Vienna, Friedrich August Hayek, who urged his fellow intellectuals to engage the “battle of ideas and policy” in order to promote the cause of freedom (cited in Cockett, 1995, 123 – 24). In a world suffering the consequences of totalitarianism, Hayek’s book from 1944, *The Road to Serfdom*, was a best seller, and his message of untrammelled freedom for the individual as well as economic markets was received with great enthusiasm.

Another key assumption of neoliberal ideology, deriving from social Darwinism, is that we live in a world dominated by *competition*: as a species, homo sapiens gained the position of apex predator by competing with other species; and within the species, we compete as individuals in a struggle for success in which the cleverest prevail. This is how free-market capitalism works: leave it up to the Market, and everything will be better for everybody, including the consumer (but especially the capitalist or CEO). If the free individual is to thrive, the free market must be kept free, and taxation and regulation kept to a minimum.

Thanks to the influence of Hayek, and then Milton Friedman and Paul Volcker, neoliberal ideology came to dominate the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher from 1980 onward – and also outward, to conquer much of the rest of the world’s political leadership. The ideology thrives especially in the United States and United Kingdom to this day.

With her famous pronouncement, “There is no such thing as society. ... There are individual men and women and there are families” (Thatcher 1987), Thatcher

perfectly embodied the spirit of neoliberalism – and its expansion from economics into politics and society as “libertarianism.” Thatcher was an intelligent woman, but she got this one backwards: what’s real are the populations that make up the society of any given country (as in “Austrian society”), whereas “the individual” is an abstraction from that concrete reality. Thatcher’s credentials as a supreme warrior in the libertarian War of Ideas are summed up in her remarkable statement of purpose from 1981: “Economics are the method; the object is to *change the heart and soul*” (Thatcher 1981, emphasis added). It’s remarkable that so few people found this objective sinister. In any case she and her followers have been unusually successful in changing the hearts and souls of countless people since then.

Some of that success is due to an effective campaign in the War of Ideas to convince people that *economics* provides the most important measure of human flourishing. But it’s only a recent conceit that economics, and economists, can give us the right standards. Indeed, it would be “splendid” (as one of the greatest modern economists, J. M. Keynes, once suggested) “if economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people, on a level with dentists” (Keynes 1963, 373).

As a result of Reagan’s and Thatcher’s policies, the rich libertarians have essentially *bought* the political system, especially in the United States. The Koch Brothers, for example, and their Freedom Partners Action Fund have been major supporters of the War of Ideas – buying their way into colleges and universities, setting up right-wing think tanks, and founding fake grassroots “citizen activist” groups to spread and weaponise the libertarian ideology. They and their allies donated millions to get Donald Trump elected, and then immediately issued a “Roadmap to Repeal,” containing a list of things they wanted the new administration to do. At the end of 2017 they congratulated themselves, and the Trump administration, for getting almost all of those things done: a highly successful business transaction (see Parkes 2021, 78ff.).

If you buy a government – and this has also happened in the UK and many other countries – you have a great deal of power over how people live, especially if you control how free-market capitalism operates (see Reich 2021). This is a widespread problem, but with a fairly simple solution: *Get the money out of politics!* Simple but not easy: you have to make democracy work and persuade the 99.9 percent to *vote*.

#### **IV. High Tech Spectacle**

In order to promote the neoliberal agenda further, and influence how people want to live, you also need to make sure your libertarian allies (like Rupert Murdoch) control the mass media – and then you can probably count on social media to do the rest. In expanding the Free Market so as to encompass *all* human activity, the right-wing

billionaires have had to work closely with the libertarians behind the latest information and communications technology, the Tech Titans of Silicon Valley.

The Titans of Big Tech have given us the supreme version of what Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* presciently described as *le spectacle*. The key to the spectacle is that “everything that used to be lived directly has now shifted into a *representation*” (Debord 1994, § 1). That was in 1967, when television and cinema were the dominant visual media: Debord should see us now, gazing transfixed into the representation-filled virtual spaces in our smartphones.

The Spectacle is a profoundly un-Buddhist enterprise, designed not to wake us up but to keep us in a stupor. Its soporific quality comes from the transformation of things into images: “Simple images become real beings and effective motivators of hypnotic behaviour.” And when consumerism shifts into high gear, the sleep is anything but restful: “The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, and ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep” (Debord 1994, § 18, 21). A society in chains, captivated and motivated by images – just as in Plato’s Cave – a mass of sleepers and restless dreamers.

It’s also a society in which the spectacle deliberately intensifies individualism. Debord writes: “*Isolation* is at the basis of the technologies, and the technical process isolates in return. From the automobile to television, the goods *selected* by the spectacular system are also its weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that produce ‘lonely crowds’” (Debord 1994, § 28). Nowadays our favourite pastime seems to be *screening reality* in isolation. Most people think of screens as windows of some kind, through which we gain access to another world. But in its original meaning a screen is something that blocks or *conceals* some of what’s around us: room partition screens, fire-screens, window-screens, and so forth. One root of the English word “screen” means *shield* – it’s even better in German: *Bildschirm*, literally, “image-shield.” So, what are these images on our screens shielding us from, or against? Our mortality, for one thing, surely.

Naomi Klein’s excellent study of the power of corporate branding, *No Logo*, showed how forcefully the modern corporation imposes on us an ideology of the good consumer life. She described how the “corporate obsession with brand identity is waging a war” on many institutions, but crucially “on youthful identities,” on young people’s sense of who they are (Klein 2000, 5). That was in 1999, and many youthful identities are by now completely dissolved into profiles on social media and immersed in late capitalist fantasies about the good human life.

As good libertarians, the Tech Titans operate more or less free *from* taxes and regulations, and free *to* addict and manipulate their users, depriving them of time to attend to where they actually are, and blinding them to any risks – from climate change,

for example – that might be imminent. They are expert at addicting their “users” because they (or their researchers) have studied their Marshall McLuhan, who remarked some years earlier than Debord the narcotic effects of new media technologies. If “the medium *is* the message,” as McLuhan suggests, then worrying about the “content” of new media is beside the point. “Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.” And amidst all this distraction, our minds are being changed unobtrusively by the manipulators of Silicon Valley, as they surreptitiously confine us in what McLuhan called “prisons without walls” (McLuhan 1964, 18, 20).

Few people have stated the problem more succinctly than the novelist J. M. Coetzee. The protagonist of his autobiographical novel *Youth* is a young computer programmer in London in the early 1960s. In the course of his evening readings in the history of logic he begins to wonder about the mainframe computer: “There are many alternative logics, he is convinced (but how many?), each just as good as the logic of *either/or*. The threat of the toy by which he earns his living [the computer], the threat that makes it more than just a toy, is that it will burn *either/or* paths in the brains of its users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic” (Coetzee 2003, 160). We do well to burn the twenty words of that threat into our awareness in letters of fire — since our immersion in the digital world, with its stark binary logic of *either/or* (zero-one, this-that, black-white, on-off, yes-no, for-against), may well be responsible for much of the polarisation and discord that are unsettling our contemporary societies.

But why we should allow people like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Sundar Pichai, Peter Thiel, Mark Zuckerberg et al. to determine how we want to live? Who do they think *they* are? The rich libertarians initially planned to escape taxation and regulation by going offshore, into “seasteading” communities. But now that their War of Ideas is causing the whole planet to burn, they’re aiming higher – to get the hell out, and colonise the moon, or even Mars (see Rushkoff 2022). And since the human body sustains irreparable damage from spending too much time off-planet, we can reliably infer that these adventurers are good Cartesians who regard themselves primarily as *minds*, and only contingently as bodies.

The suspicion is confirmed by their Plan B: in case they’re unable to liberate themselves from the Earth, they’ll have the contents of their formidable brains uploaded to somewhere in “the Cloud,” while their bodies are cryonically deep-frozen in anticipation of resurrection once techniques of reversing ageing have been perfected. The egomania is impressive: these people are determined to hang around for as many aeons as possible.



But just because that's how they think *they* are, there's no need for us to buy into this kind of self-understanding. To lessen the risk of mental contagion, we could simply tune out for a while, and disconnect from much of what the Internet offers. Just unplug and turn off what we don't need. But if we do that, won't we get bored? And who, then, are we, if we're not good consumers?

## V. How Else We Might Be

Let us try thinking of ourselves as basically *inter-relatives*: after all, we all come into the world as issue of egg and sperm interacting. For the ancient Chinese thinkers, we're related to family and friends, and other members of the society we live in; to all the natural beings that surround and sustain us; and to the *things* we live with (so-called "inanimate" things). This means going beyond the human in our self-conception, to include all other beings in the world.

According with an archetypal understanding found in many philosophical (and especially indigenous) traditions, one that regards all things as condensing out of and dissolving back into an all-pervasive medium, the Chinese understand the world as a dynamic field of *qi* energies. These energies range along a continuum from rarefied and invisible (as with the breath) to condensed and substantial (as with rock), and also oscillate between the polarities of *yin* and *yang* (as with electric charges).

A major feature of this field is "sympathetic resonance" (*ganying*), whereby phenomena resonate especially with others of the same kind, often at a distance. Pluck a zither string tuned to a certain note and a similarly tuned string on a nearby instrument will vibrate in sympathy. In the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*, in the commentary on the first hexagram we read: "Things that accord in tone vibrate together. Things that have affinity in their inmost natures seek one another" (Baynes 1967, 382). And for hexagram 31, "Influence," with a lake above and mountain below, it is written: "The forces of the weak above and the strong below stimulate and respond to each other, so that they unite. / Keeping still below and joyfulness above. The masculine subordinates itself to the feminine" (Baynes, 541). And through this union of the mutually influenced there emerge new life and the myriad things.

In a world of *qi* energies, all things are interrelated, some more closely than others, and so ecological thinking is a natural development. A person's project does well to integrate their energy expenditures with the propensities of the energy field, represented by the powers of Heaven and Earth. Relational understandings of ourselves in the world are all-important in our current situation, and we can appreciate their relevance by considering their role in speeches by China's President, Xi Jinping. In his early career he quoted frequently from the Chinese philosophical classics and has continued to promote China's transformation from an industrial to an "ecological

civilization.” It is sad that the Xi regime has failed to follow through on its commitment to ancient Chinese ideas, but it’s the ideas that are important – given that they can be enacted by anyone who isn’t infected by Cartesian individualism.

Let’s begin with a speech that Xi gave at Peking University on the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May Fourth Movement (Xi 2014, 185 – 99). His topic was “the Core Socialist Values,” but he spent much of the speech praising the core values of the “ancestors in ancient China” and the glories of “traditional Chinese culture.” “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” has to become socialism with ancient Chinese philosophical characteristics. After weaving several passages from classical Confucian texts into his address, he then says “Here are some quotations from ancient classics that I’d like to share with you today” – and goes on to hit the audience with no fewer than *twenty* of them in a row.

Xi launches his list of quotes with two fundamental ideas from the beginning of the Chinese tradition: “The people are the basis of the state,” and “Nature and the human work as one.” Beginning with the second: it refers to an original harmony between the human and the powers of Heaven and Earth: a harmony that has been lost and is well worth regaining. The practical implication is that human activities tend to fail when they conflict with the powers of Heaven and Earth and are more likely to succeed when integrated with them. Our insistence on burning fossil fuels, pursuing massive deforestation, and raising cattle on an industrial scale generates a volume of greenhouse gas emissions that is throwing off the Earth’s energy balance, disrupting the dynamic harmony that prevailed during the Holocene Era. If we are to let the biosphere regain its integrity, we have to restore harmony among the Heavens, the human world, and the Earth as much as we can.

When Xi returned to the topic of “the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature” a couple of years later, he invoked this time the ideas of Frederick Engels: “According to materialistic dialectics ... the world is an interrelated whole and an interactive system.” He then emphasised that “human development activities must respect, accommodate, and protect nature; otherwise, nature will retaliate against us” (Xi 2017, 225, 228). To illustrate the point, he paraphrased that wonderful passage in *Dialectics of Nature* (in ‘The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man’) where Engels gives an account of civilisations in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and Europe that ignored the principle of protecting nature – and suffered dire consequences as a result (Xi 2017, 228 – 229).

Xi went on to list some major twentieth-century environmental disasters in the West, followed by a series of environmental abuses in the history of China up to the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, coming to this eminently sensible conclusion: “We must take warning from these cases.” These are salutary reminders indeed –

along with the devastating consequences of Mao Zedong's "war against nature," which began with the Great Leap Forward. In stark contrast, Xi quoted Engels again: "Let us not flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory, nature takes its revenge on us" (Xi 2017, 229 – 230).

In an interesting turn, Xi then showed how these ideas of Engels are anticipated in the ancient Chinese classics, citing relevant passages from the *Analects* of Confucius, the masterpiece by the third great Confucian thinker, *Xunzi*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei* (Xi 2017, 230 – 231). The gist of the passages he cites is that human activities such as fishing, hunting, and tree-cutting need to be practised *sustainably* (to use a modern term), so as not to deplete the natural resources on which our existence depends. These are perfectly timely ideas, and all the more pertinent in the light of Xi's insistence on their compatibility with Marxist socialism on these topics – grounds, surely, for a productive conversation with western countries on environmental issues.

Xi's ambition for China is to make it into "a modestly prosperous society," rather than an opulent paradise of consumerism. His often-stated opposition to "hedonism and extravagance and waste" (Xi 2014, *passim*) is correspondingly absent from political rhetoric in most western countries. This attitude is perfectly in line with the Confucian encouragement of modesty and restraint (though not to the point of asceticism), as well as the Daoists' promotion of sufficiency and their warnings against excess. An emphasis on moderation, which also comes from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, is perfect for our present era, now that we've brought the age of planetary abundance to an end. It's a pity that the Chinese middle classes have fallen for consumerism in such a big way, and we should hope that the Chinese Communist Party can persuade them that the pursuit of greater wealth and ever more pleasure is a dead end – since natural limits will in any case put an end to excessive levels of consumption.

In a speech to the Third Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee in 2013, Xi addressed the question of how to "improve the country's resource management system." He reminded his colleagues that "the people together with mountains, waters, forests, farmlands and lakes form a living community," and emphasised that "to control the exploitation of natural resources and restore ecosystems, we must follow the laws of nature" (Xi 2014, 95 – 96). This allusion to Laozi's *Daodejing* (ch. 25) sums up the Daoist attitude perfectly. Human activities meet with success when they follow the ways of the greater powers of Heaven and Earth, which in turn exemplify the spontaneous patterning of *dao*.

When Xi inspected flood control measures in Anhui province in 2020, he again recommended "following the laws of nature" in dealing with flooding, and praised the legendary Emperor Yu's sensible "way of dealing with water." This echoes the

passage in the *Mencius* where Yu is praised for taming the floods by “following water’s natural ways” (*Mencius* VI.B11). Xi’s attitude is a welcome change from former president Jiang Zemin’s, who during a ceremony at the Three Gorges Dam dismayed ecologically-minded academics in China by triumphantly repeating the Maoist slogan: “The human being must conquer nature.”

It was an encouraging sign when China for the first time hosted a major United Nations conference on the environment (the 2021 UN Biodiversity Conference, in Kunming), and when Xi in his keynote speech confirmed China’s transition to an “ecological civilization.” All the preceding ideas concerning humans and the natural world constitute a salutary counterweight to the hyper-individualistic view of the human being promoted by the libertarians, whereby we flourish by extracting as much from the natural world as we can, regardless of the consequences. The problem is that Xi Jinping doesn’t appear to be following through on his classical Chinese philosophy-inspired rhetoric. In a speech in 2022, for instance, he said: “China’s low-carbon ambitions must not interfere with normal life” (Ni 2022). Recent studies have shown that China is suffering, and will continue to suffer, more than most countries from extremes of weather brought on by global heating. A consideration of the massive flooding that hit the country last year makes it clear that extremes of weather are *already* interfering with normal life for many millions of Chinese (see Parkes 2023).

## **VI. Well-Being of the People**

The very first of Xi’s twenty “quotations from ancient classics” at Peking University was this maxim attributed to Emperor Yu: “The people are the basis of the state” (2014, 190). He omitted the beginning of the dictum: “The emperor must cherish the people and never abuse them,” but he often acknowledges that the ruler’s obligation to “take good care of the people” is also just what Marxist socialism demands when applied to Chinese conditions. The Party must be, as Xi frequently reminds his colleagues, “dedicated to serving the people” (Xi 2014, *passim*). This is quite in keeping with the ancient Chinese idea that the emperor as the Son of Heaven must take care of the people – as the basis of the state – as if they were his own children. If he fails, it will be a sign that he has lost the Mandate of Heaven and it’s time for a new regime.

Ever since Yu’s success in taking care of the floodwaters, rulers in China have been granted legitimacy on their ability to manage the power of water so as to ensure the welfare of the people. And insofar as the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party depends on its taking good care of the people for the long term, it had better not ignore or downplay the danger of global heating, which is already inflicting considerable harm – by way of flooding and sea level rise – on millions of Chinese citizens.

Many of Xi Jinping's quotations from the Chinese classics concern political philosophy: how best to govern, and how to achieve harmonious co-existence with other states. A key idea here is that the ruler and the state should lead by example rather than govern by coercion – a remarkable Confucian anticipation of the idea of “soft power,” which is something the Chinese government has long been keen to cultivate. But because Xi Jinping's policies, domestically and internationally, have recently taken a path that's diametrically *opposed* to the Confucian political philosophy that he has advocated, China's soft power is at an all-time low.

The absence of any serious climate leadership from the world's former hegemon, the United States, opens the way for China to lead global action to cope with the climate crisis. In a speech to the CCP National Congress in 2017, under the lengthy title “Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era,” Xi said the country was “taking the driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change” (cited in Phillips 2017). The world is waiting for the sound of the engine starting. If he were to follow ancient Chinese wisdom in taking the lead on slowing global heating for the long-term benefit of the Chinese people, he would in one stroke legitimise the Party's rule *and* gain the gratitude of the whole world and the greatest soft-power triumph in human history.

We in the West would do well to encourage this course of action – and in any case we would ourselves benefit from adopting a view of who we are that opposes libertarian individualism and encourages thinking of ourselves as relatives rather than individuals. That would help us deal with the climate and biodiversity crises and make it more likely that humanity can survive the era that now bears its name.

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