

## ***Teach China Sustainability Issues in China:***

*Featured Resources Related to Study Tours Summer 2010, “History, Culture, and Sustainable Development” & Spring 2011, “Yunnan – Continuous Change, Enduring Traditions”*

### Primary and Secondary Sources

Throughout *Teach China*'s 2010 and 2011 study tours, we explored not only contemporary perspectives on how to explore issues related to sustainable development, but we also examined traditional Chinese thought systems with an eye towards how these traditions might inform a more complete understanding of how Chinese people have thought about the relationship between man and nature and how those traditions might enrich contemporary discussions about why we might want to promote a more balanced use of natural resources and how best to understand humanity's obligations to the natural world. The following resources are intended to briefly introduce Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist perspectives on the relationship between man and nature, followed by suggested questions for how to discuss these perspectives in a structured conversation about sustainable development.

### Exploring Confucian Humanism as an “Anthropocosmic Vision”

天人合一 (*tianrenheyi*) “Harmony Between Humans and Heaven”

The following is a perspective from great Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE) Neo-Confucian philosopher, Wang Yangming, and informs a contemporary perspective advanced by the eminent Confucian scholar, Tu Weiming, who has written about Confucianism's potential contribution to contemporary ideas about environmentalism:

**“The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person. As to those who make a cleavage between objects and distinguish between self and others, they are small men. That the great man can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he deliberately wants to do so, but because it is natural to the humane nature of his mind that he do so....When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an “inability to bear” their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones.”**

--Wang Yangming (Wang Yang-ming), “Inquiry on the Great Learning,” in Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 659-660.

In this perspective of nature, what do you think Wang Yanming would argue would be human's ethical way of acting in the natural world? What would be the consequences if human's did not act in an ethical way with the natural world?

Do you think this perspective has relevancy in contemporary society? Why or why not?

Suggested secondary resources for understanding Confucian perspectives on sustainable development:

“The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World,” by Tu Weiming, in *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Fall 2001: <http://www.amacad.org/publications/fall2001/weiming.aspx>

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## Daoist Notions of the Value of Nature

Out of China's very rich philosophical tradition, perhaps none revere nature as deeply as Daoism (aka Taoism) – a complex philosophical and religious thought system indigenous to China that believes all things derive from an original “*dao*” [道, “way” or “path”] and man should strive to attain harmony with the natural *dao* through non-action in order to achieve longevity and prosperity. The following is from a chapter of the Daoist classic, *The Chuang Tzu*, which often uses whimsical anecdotes as a launching point for deep philosophical considerations.

### **THE MOUNTAIN TREE (chapter 20 of *The Chuang Tzu* [or *The Zhuangzi*])**

**Chuang Tzu was walking in the mountains when he saw a huge tree, its branches and leaves thick and lush. A woodcutter paused by its side but made no move to cut it down. When Chuang Tzu asked the reason, he replied, "There's nothing it could be used for!" Chuang Tzu said, "Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years Heaven gave it."**

**Down from the mountain, the Master stopped for a night at the house of an old friend. The friend, delighted, ordered his son to kill a goose and prepare it. "One of the geese can cackle and the other can't," said the son. "May I ask, please, which I should kill?"**

**"Kill the one that can't cackle," said the host.**

**The next day Chuang Tzu's disciples questioned him. "Yesterday there was a tree on the mountain that gets to live out the years Heaven gave it because of its worthlessness. Now there's our host's goose that gets killed because of its worthlessness. What position would you take in such a case, Master?"**

**Chuang Tzu laughed and said, "I'd probably take a position halfway between worth and worthlessness. But halfway between worth and worthlessness, though it might seem to be a good place, really isn't - you'll never get away from trouble there. It would be very different, though, if you were to climb up on the Way and its Virtue and go drifting and wandering, neither praised nor damned, now a dragon, now a snake, shifting with the times, never willing to hold to one course only. Now up, now down, taking harmony for your measure, drifting and wandering with the ancestor of the ten thousand things, treating things as things but not letting them treat you as a thing - then how could you get into any trouble? This is the rule, the method of Shen Nung and the Yellow Emperor<sup>1</sup>.**

**"But now, what with the forms of the ten thousand things and the codes of ethics handed down from man to man, matters don't proceed in this fashion. Things join only to part, reach completion only to crumble. If sharp-edged, they are blunted; if high-stationed, they are overthrown; if ambitious, they are foiled. Wise, they are schemed against; stupid, they are swindled. What is there, then, that can be counted on? Only one thing, alas! - remember this, my students - only the realm of the Way and its Virtue!"**

From this passage, what do you think the Daoist tradition values in nature? What do you make of Chuang-tzu's appreciation of the “worthlessness” of a natural object?

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<sup>1</sup> Shen Nung and the Yellow Emperor are legendary sage kings in Chinese mythology who are often revered as divine beings in the Taoist tradition. Shen Nung (or Shennong) is attributed with teaching humans agriculture and the Yellow Emperor is revered as the originator of a centralized state.

Chuang-tzu speaks somewhat disparagingly of “codes of ethics handed down from man to man” – what do think the implications of this train of thought is for debating state action and its effect on the natural world?

What do you imagine is the ideal Daoist social state would be after reading a passage like this?

Suggested resources:

The Complete Works Of Chuang Tzu, translated by Burton Watson:

<http://www.coldbacon.com/chuang/chuang.html>

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## Uses of Natural Imagery in Buddhist Influenced Poetry

Buddhism is not an indigenous Chinese thought system but a “foreign” belief system that arrived and flourished in China after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century common era. Buddhism is another complex thought system, but at its core it teaches that all phenomena is transitory and advocates that individuals pursue a life of non-attachment in order to reach *nirvana*, or the cessation of suffering derived from desires. This system of thought proved especially challenging for study tour participants to integrate into a larger debate about sustainable development; even so, our visits to Buddhist communities clearly demonstrated a respect for nature and an apprehension on the impact unchecked growth has on communities.

As a launching point for thinking about how Chinese Buddhist sources could be used in a discussion about sustainable development, the *Teach China* program introduced participants to a poem by the famous Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) poet, Wang Wei, a poet who was heavily in. We gave four different translations of the poem to illustrate the slippery nature of trying to translate classic Chinese poetry.

### **A Poem by Wang Wei**

"Birds Sing in the Ravine"

Few people see the acacia blossoms fall,  
night is quiet, the spring mountain empty.  
The sudden moon alarms mountain birds.  
Long moment of song in the spring ravine.

(trans. by Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin -- round 1)

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"Birds Sing in the Ravine"

At rest, he senses acacia blossoms fall.  
Quiet night, the spring mountain empty.  
The sudden moon alarms mountain birds.  
Pulses of song in the spring ravine.

(trans. by Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin -- round 2)

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"Birds calling in the valley"

Men at rest, cassia flowers falling  
Night still, spring hills empty  
The moon rises, rouses birds in the hills  
And sometimes they cry in the spring valley.

(trans. by G.W. Robinson)

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"Bird-Cry Creek"

In our idleness, cinnamon blossoms fall.  
In night quiet, spring mountains stand

empty. Moonrise startles mountain birds:  
here and there, cries in a spring gorge.

(trans. by David Hinton)

What are the natural elements you can observe in this poem? Why do you think the poet used these particular natural elements?

Does the genre of this writing change how you discuss nature when compared to the excerpts from a Confucian and a Daoist perspective? If so, how do you see the approach differently?

Do you think this poem and the effect it might have on a reader could be written in the contemporary world? Why or why not?

Try writing a poem with the same natural elements from your own environment. Are the poems similar or dissimilar?

Suggested Secondary Resources:

For the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet's Messages on Environmentalism, visit his website at <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/environment>.