

PROGRESS, DEMOCRACY AND POLLUTION: CHINA'S ECOLOGICAL ARMAGEDDON

By Antony Ou

Faith in progress is a superstition.
-- Heresies, John Gray

Idea of Progress as a Myth

In the broadest sense, the Idea of Progress is a belief that technological, scientific, socio-political advancement will eventually improve the quality of life, happiness, and well-being of one's society. In the West, it is a concept which can be traced back to ancient Greece, ancient Rome and Early Christian times. It is an overwhelming and recurring theme in intellectual movements like the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In his book *History of the Idea of Progress*, Robert Nisbet has summarised the five core premises of the Idea of Progress:

1. Value of the past,
2. Nobility of Western civilization,
3. Worth of economic/technological growth,
4. Faith in reason and scientific/scholarly knowledge obtained through reason,
5. Intrinsic importance and worth of life on earth.¹

Thinkers such as Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Adam Ferguson, John Stuart Mills, and Herbert Spencer had all identified Progress as an unquestionable prerequisite of human advancement. To offer one example, since the late 19th century Marxism was one of the dominant forces of the Idea of Progress. Although scholars, governments and the general public in the West have subsequently challenged the Idea of Progress, Chinese intellectuals embraced the idea and implemented it since the late 19th century. As Metzger puts, "... the Western promise of material progress was welcomed not by people with just the normal human desire for rising living standards but by people for whom this very question of 'the people's livelihood' was philosophically of the utmost importance."² Cheng Kuan-ying (1842-1923) and Kang Yowei (1858-1927) were the notable scholars who militantly supported such idea. This can be seen, for instance, when Cheng Kuan-ying



two mountains. Yu Gong and his family, as the story goes, then lived happily ever after.

This Chinese version of the “*Übermensch*” was an ancient idol for Mao’s China.⁵ That passage from *Lie Zi* had been the most cited story, quoted by Chairman Mao Zedong, his party members and citizens. It was an ancient fairy tale justifying a secular myth. The moral behind the story was not only about individual self-determination. It also praised the selflessness, self-reliance, faith and honesty of the Chinese communist society.⁶ More importantly, the moral of the story was a political tool to justify the party slogan that “Man can conquer nature” (人定勝天). Chinese citizens, according to Mao and his Party, had to learn from Yu Gong by gathering every power, resource, and ounce of energy to conquer every challenge. Specifically, nature, like mountains, can be altered, corrected and modified to suit the needs of the communist society. In other words, Heaven can be conquered by the “general will” of the Chinese proletariat.

Mao envisaged that science and technology were the most essential tools for the advancement of the human condition in socialist China, from an agrarian economy to state communism under the process of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. Together with the “progressive” guidance and governance of the enlightened CCP leaders, the “Chinese” can conquer nature and perfect the socialist state. “Relying on a highly personal system of moral suasion with few environmental regulations and no codified environmental laws,” the ecological system of China had been deteriorated by poorly-educated peasants under the rule of Mao.⁷ The Great Leap Forward (1958-1959) was the most extreme illustration of the blind faith in Progress.

To catch up to superpowers like the Soviet Union, the UK and the US, Mao thought that China must undergo intensive industrialisation by collective organisation within 15 years. “With 11 million tons of steel next year and 17 million tons the year after, the world will be shaken. If we can reach 40 million tons in five years, we may possibly catch up with Great Britain in seven years. Add another eight years and we will catch up with the US.”⁸ This could be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic response, but the consequences were devastating.

Mao’s plan was a campaign isolated from the rest of the world, which caused widespread famine. It led to tens of millions of deaths or imprisonments and the Chinese economy was almost completely ruined. In the autumn of 1958 alone,



proclaimed that western technology could achieve the human condition desired in China and even achieve the utopia that Confucian sages envisaged.³ Such Sinocentric optimism, as a response to the humiliations of Western imperialism, prevailed during the era of the Republic of China (1912-1949) and was extensively implemented after Mao Zedong's communist China. From 1949 onwards, the political agenda has always been scientific and economic progress in different forms. The Idea of Progress has become the very basis of the legitimacy of Chinese Communist Party.

Other sceptics, such as John Gray, insist that although there might be some advancement in certain areas (such as dentistry), the faith of progress is obviously a mythical construction of human beings.⁴ Scientific and technological optimism is the wishful thinking of intellectuals who do not acknowledge the situation that science and technology do not entail rational socio-political arrangements and judgments. More often, the blind faith of Progress leads to human and ecological disasters as shown in this essay. Moreover, if we think of one of the extreme forms of the Idea of Progress, i.e. Social Darwinism, which has led to the expansion of imperialism and international exploitation, we might need to take a step back and reflect or even condemn any possible visions brought forward by the Idea of Progress.

In this essay, I attempt to illustrate how this Idea of Progress has endangered the ecological system of China since 1949. Then, I will explicate how the prevalence of Progress becomes the sole pillar of legitimacy for the central government.

The essay then argues that, due to the legitimacy of Progress, the ecological system of China has become irreversibly disastrous in the 21st century. The conclusion states that when the belief of Progress is bankrupted by the environmental degradation and economic downturn, the legitimacy of the non-democratic regime will be vigorously and inevitably shaken.

Story of Yu Gong: The Chinese "Übermensch" that Conquers Nature

One of the Taoist Classics *Lie Zi* records the tale of Yu Gong (which literally means "foolish old man"). Yu Gong was both, in this telling, a ninety-year old man and a determined person. The story goes that his family home was blocked by two huge mountains, which caused Yu Gong and his family great inconvenience. Yu Gong made up his mind and persuaded his family to move the mountains away, despite the disagreement of his wife, saying that the inconvenience had existed through generations. The family started to work on the very next day with simple tools. They encountered enormous hardship and difficulties but the work never stopped.

One day, a so-called wise man said to Yu Gong, "you are too old for this. How could you possibly move the two mountains?" He replied, "I might soon die, yet, my sons will continue my work. They will have children, and they can continue my work as well. My family will grow, but the mountains will become smaller. With such determination, one day, we will move the mountains." Yu Gong's determination had eventually reached the Heavens and two demi-gods were sent to remove the



China's peoples had created 10,700,000 tons of worthless "steel" by melting many farming tools and utensils.⁹ Worse still, countrywide deforestation became extremely severe, which led to erosion, sedimentation, desertification, changes in microclimate, loss of animal habitats and arable land.¹⁰ Wood, instead of the more common coal, had been the major source of energy for steel smelting. Enthusiastic peasants in China fanatically cut down trees for such a purpose. For example, and despite certain statistical difficulties, Shapiro concluded that "at least 10 percent of China's forests were cut down within a few short months during the Leap".¹¹

The Leap was not the only socio-political mass movement that led to the environmental degradation of China: the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) also created irreversible ecological shocks. Millions of "educated youth" were sent to rural areas, receiving the "re-education of farmers." As a result of this railroads, tunnels, and bridges were built for the development of China's Southwest. This in turn caused severe air and water pollution.¹²

Myth of Progress Prevails as a Substitution for Democracy

The Open Door Policy was an economic policy adopted since 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, which promoted a capitalistic system. It was a gradual economic and political process, opening up China to the outside world. It was also a fundamental shift of domestic and foreign policies from Mao's. Instead of continuing Mao's militant faith in collectivisation and statist industrialisation, Deng believed in market forces and privatisation.

However, Deng never gave up the faith in Progress either, as he famously proclaimed that "only development makes hard sense." Economic progress was the first priority for post-Mao China. Deng and his party encouraged vast amounts of foreign investment and manufacturing exports from the rest of the world. Quite possibly as a result of this, China is now the fastest growing economy and the second largest economy of the world, with an ostensibly sustainable economic growth rate that has been steadily maintained over the past 30 years.

Because of this the myth of Progress prevails only in a different form. By "letting some people to get rich first," according to Deng, the benefits would, sooner or later, spread to people around the country (was he buying into the trickle-down theory of early neoliberalism?). By producing the economic and social class of the "new rich," people's grievances would subside. In other words, economic progress becomes the utmost priority of the CCP and so the regime must sustain "reasonable growth" in order to strengthen its legitimacy of government and governance. Consequently, economic progress substitutes for democracy as the only source of governmental legitimacy, authority and confidence.

The enlarging income gap, structural corruption, social problems and human rights deprivation are all trade-offs for this economic development, while environmental disasters are another "necessary cost." No country has encountered the magnitude of China's environmental challenges in the 20th and



21st centuries. In the book *China's Ecological Winter*, Zheng Yi has provided a comprehensive review of Chinese pollution.¹³ Here are some examples: more than 30% of fresh water in China is now considered undrinkable by the CCP. This affects over 500 million people as they are now unable to gain access to clean and safe water. Environmental pollution of various kinds have caused a wide range of diseases that include: respiratory problems, cardiovascular damage, heavy metal poisoning, and cancer. According to the Ministry of Health, cancer has become China's leading cause of death and this is a direct result of the rampant pollution within China. Environmental pollution has also increased the level of social instability throughout the country in the 21st century. Riots and social conflicts are only going to increase in the foreseeable future as long as the local Chinese authorities continue to condone irresponsible but preventable toxic landfills and industrial waste dumping. To offer a picture of the magnitude of mainland China's social turbulence, recent figures in 2012 have posited that there have been more than 100,000 protests throughout the country in this year alone.¹⁴

The CCP has apparently recognised the problem. In 2007, the Scientific Development Project, the current official state policy, emphasised the importance of sustainable development, social welfare, and increasing the quality of democracy, in order to construct the ultimate goal of a "Harmonious Society." However, the problems are so huge and immanent that this state policy can never be satisfactorily implemented in local levels.¹⁵ If the state has not yet fully recognised and reconsidered its blind

faith in Progress, the environmental problems its policies has caused can never be alleviated.

Conclusion

Scientific and technological progress, which people believe has led to economic advancement and thus the well-being of China, is simply a fiction. Instead, the overwhelming evidence of environmental degradation shows that the by-products of such progress have ironically led to destroying Chinese people's well-being.

Even if scientific and technological progress actually advances economic well-being, the latter in its current forms can never be steadily progressed with in the long run. Economic downturn happens. Without narrowing the income gap between the rich and poor, governments, which solely rely on economic growth, are absolutely in danger because disappointments and grievances due to economic recessions would gradually shake the very core of the regime. In other words, economic progress cannot be the only element that wins the "hearts and minds" of the people. Democratic and liberal values such as freedom of speech, assembly and press, representativeness, accountability, transparency with minimal corruption, are keys to any sustainable governments in the 21st century.

Nationalism, consequently, becomes the ultimate political tool of the authoritarian regime which it uses to salvage its legitimacy. By adopting the same old tricks invented in the late 19th century by the "imperialists," riots and conflicts from different villages and cities might



be appeased for some moment by diverting the passions of individuals therein to the fabricated villainy of Japan, the South China/West Philippine Sea and the US. However, nationalism is a double-edged sword: on one hand, it resumes the loyalty and inclusiveness of “imagined communities”; on the other hand, people gather and begin to question the problems of the regime. Because of this, new kinds of “consciousness” are emerging as individuals in China gradually come to realize their true enemy.

If the state cannot sustain its economic growth, compounded by intractable environmental problems, and governed by a non-democratic regime, the belief of Progress is the only sedative left before the dawn of Armageddon.

Notes:

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1. Nisbet, Robert. (1980). *History of the Idea of Progress*. Basic Books, New York. p.317.
2. Metzger, Thomas. (1986). *Escape from Predicament*. Columbia University Press, New York. p.215
3. *ibid.*, p.215

4. Gray, John. (2004). *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*. Granta UK, London. pp.17-18.
5. The CCP had notoriously tried to destroy Chinese culture during Mao's era by smashing temples and condemning classics such as the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius*. However, from time to time, ancient stories would be told and modified to suit the political agenda of the CCP.
6. Starr, John Bryan, (1979). *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao*. Princeton University Press, Princeton. pp.227-232.
7. Economy, Elizabeth C. (2010). *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*. (2nd Ed.).Cornell University Press, Ithaca. p.38.
8. Shapiro, Judith (2001). *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and Environment in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge University Press, New York. p.74
9. *ibid.*, p. 75
10. *ibid.*, p.80
11. *ibid.*, p.80
12. *ibid.*, pp.139-194
13. Zheng, Yi. (2001). *China's Ecological Winter*. (in Chinese). Mirror Books, Hong Kong.
14. See, for example, Michael Vaughan (2012). “China and Regime Stability,” presented at the UNAA Conference Roundtable entitled *Democracy and the UN*, August 22, 2-5 pm, Brisbane, Australia.
15. For details, please see the other article of this issue of Political Reflection Quarterly written by Sunny Lam. Lam, Sunny (2012). “The Politics of Environmental Protection - Sustainable Development Implementation Gaps in China”. *Political Reflection Vol.3 - No.4*.

