

Chapter 27

China Declares Global State of Emergency: An Urgent Telegram from Taihu

On May 18th, China's 4th most powerful politician, Yu Zhengsheng, Chairman of the National Committee of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) opened the Second Conference of the (carbon-neutralized) Taihu World Cultural Forum [1] in Hangzhou, a city one hour by speed train southwest of Shanghai. "What kind of a planet will we leave to our descendants? This is an urgent subject which deserves the collective attention of the whole world," he said with a sincere air of emergency (Fig. 27.1).

The ancient city of Hangzhou, with its gorgeous West Lake, in the Province of Zhejiang, was once thought of as "Paradise on Earth," at least when Marco Polo visited. It remains one of China's most beautiful and popular destinations. However, the 500 political leaders, scientists, NGOs, and bio-cultural experts from 23 countries were not simply there to enjoy the unusually pollution-free environs. Rather, this was the mother of all "middle of the night emergency sessions," with a singular and downright desperate focus: how to save China, how to save the world?

For Hangzhou, a city of nearly 8 million people, with a greater metropolitan population of over 21 million, this was the highest-level meeting since China's independence in 1949 (Fig. 27.2).

Present were world leaders like Mozambique's President Armando Emilio Guebuza, Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, H.E. Ruud Lubbers [2], Dame Louise Lake-Tack, Governor-General of Antigua and Barbuda, Her Royal Highness Princess Irene Emma Elisabeth of the Netherlands, two time Nobel Peace Prize nominee and Founding President of the Club of Budapest, Dr. Ervin Laszlo, Dr. Qu Geping, Honorary President of the China Environmental Protection Foundation, numerous ambassadors and a Who's Who of Chinese scientists. Each addressed from countless—and urgently conveyed perspectives—a candid and unflinching message: we are witnessing the potential extinction of humanity at our own hands, along with most other terrestrial and marine vertebrates. What can we do; what must we do to prevent it?

The stakes for China are daunting. Consider some of the following components of her ecological unraveling: Every year, 60 km or more of the country turn to desert, whilst 3.5 million square miles (some 2.1 billion acres) or 82% of the country's primary forest has already been destroyed, and with it, an increasingly dire

Fig. 27.1 Chinese press converge at Taihu. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



Fig. 27.2 Hangzhou residents enjoying the lake on a Sunday. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



percentage of the 30,000 or so endemic plants (8% of the world's total). Over 27% of China's 6347 vertebrates (including 581 mammal, 1244 avian and 660 reptile and amphibian species) are at risk of extinction, including the largest number of threatened primates, from rare snub-nosed monkeys of the genus *Rhinopithecus* to the Hainan Gibbon.

As for the estimated 20,000 Chinese marine species—into whose in-shore and oceanic biomes the vast majority of Chinese chemical toxins are dumped—disappearing Pink, and Yangtze River dolphins are unambiguous indicator species. Other such bio-indicator species include Père David's Deer, Snow Leopards, the Chinese Alligator, Pangolin, and the world's largest number of endemic pheasants, not to mention a quarter of the world's unique *Rhododendron* species, rare ferns and other bryophytes, and—last but surely not least, the Giant Panda and—most tragically, the South China Tiger [3], deemed by the IUCN to be “functionally extinct” although it once ranged through the beautiful forests of Hangzhou (Fig. 27.3).

While in situ legislation is rapidly evolving (dating back to 1988 with the Law on the Protection of Wildlife, Order Number 9), and baseline data sets are increasingly refined for the country's vast biodiversity, abetted by all of the state-of-the-art science, geo- and bio-technologies that have so brilliantly powered China's applied

Fig. 27.3 From west lake, Hangzhou. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



engineering Renaissance and economic miracles, there remains an undiminished, if brutal truth: China has the most wilderness left to lose of any country on the planet, roughly 28% of her remaining wild countryside.

Or, one might say, China has the most wilderness yet to safeguard. That is, of course, assuming her new leadership under President Xi Jinping will maintain focus on this priority. Indeed, statistics now show that a true and lasting environmental movement has taken hold across the country.

Says Yang Zhaofei, vice-chair of the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences, “the number of environmental protests [4] has increased by an average of 29% every year since 1996, while in 2011 the number of major environmental incidents rose 120%.”

While the Taihu conference was taking place over the course of two days, cadmium-tainted rice and baby food scandals, as well as Chinese H7N9 virus human-to-human transmission prospects were making headlines. Four months earlier, Beijing—which maintains a sophisticated air quality index focusing on minute particulate matter smaller in diameter than 2.5 μm (the “invisible killer”) [5]—had seen three days of the worst air pollution [6]—in the city’s documented history reaching for the first time ever, the “Orange” [7] level of risk. Travelers to China are by now accustomed to seeing people wearing masks as particulate matter far exceeds on any given day World Health Organization recommended acceptable thresholds.

Among the salient components fueling such pollution are the fundamentally exponential GDP(s) driven by a human population explosion across the nation’s 31 provinces poised to hit between 1.4-and-(in the most sobering projections) 2 billion Chinese. Then there is the dust, and the dust storms from the deforestation largely along the North China Plain where water levels are dangerously diminishing and forests denuded. But the most obvious contributor is the nation’s vast consumption of coal (China is said to possess some 13% of the world’s recoverable coal reserves [8] for the generation of her more than 1,000 GW of currently needed electrical capacity, and with it an estimated abstraction of 12.6 m^3 of groundwater for every ton of coal across the fossil fuel’s entire supply chain.

Add to these, China’s rapacious appetite for animals on breakfast, lunch and dinner plates; what one commentator has likened to a kind of “revenge” eating of meat to make up for famines in past years. Writes Nicola Davison for the important bi-lingual magazine, “chinadialogue” (whose founder and editor attended the Taihu World Forum, Ms. Isabel Hilton, a renowned China expert and member of the Royal

Fig. 27.4 Intelligent, emotional pigs, en route to slaughter outside, Shanghai. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



Fig. 27.5 Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias



Institute of International Affairs), “In 1980 the average Chinese person ate 14 kg of meat. Today that person eats over four times more....” Moreover, says Davison, “pork is China’s favourite meat [9]: last year the country produced 50 million tons—more than half the world’s total.” With increased income generation, more pigs will be slaughtered, more effluent emitted, contributing to the overall ground-water and air pollution drama deeply embedded in everybody’s life across China (Fig. 27.4).

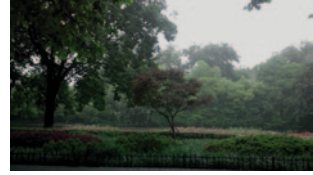
Professor Peter Li [10] has elsewhere stated that “China surpassed the US as the world’s biggest meat producer in 1990, and the Chinese authorities have long looked to the industrialized West as the object of emulation in meat production.” But, at the same time, “China has lagged behind the industrialized nations in animal protection law-making for more than 180 years (Fig. 27.5).”

China has also exported this lack of animal welfare in the same name of consumption, whether by driving the market for ivory and corresponding slaughter of elephants; or in the insatiable desire—often delusional—for aphrodisiacs or any number of other alleged animal-derived medicinals, resulting in the near extinction of rhinos and tigers, and the abominable torture and killing of bears for their bile which contains Ursodeoxycholic acid and is believed to help with human digestion and the dissolution of gallstones.

Add to this the melting of glaciers and the looming grain crisis. China’s \$ 120 billion annual surplus will not be enough to produce the 400 million tons of grain needed each year from an already arable land base whose productivity and soil nutrient turn-over rates are facing utter exhaustion and extraordinary nitrogenous fertilizer overshoot.

Ecological schizophrenia captures both the upside and colossal downside of human affairs in China. On the one hand, there is the current construction of the Shanghai Tower, second tallest and smartest building in the world, engineered at the

Fig. 27.6 Hangzhou, one of the world's great green corridor cities. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



most formidably green standards ever devised. Moreover, China has long embarked on the largest reforestation program and national strategic plant conservation initiatives in human history. But the biodiversity hotspots and coldspots are increasing—those areas with the largest aggregates of species, populations and genetic diversity at risk that would, otherwise, service—hopefully humanely, wisely and sustainably—the agricultural and medical needs of future Chinese generations. All that on top of the greatest need of all: our species' humility before the far greater vastness of millions of other species which give us essential physiological, emotional and psychological health and solace (Fig. 27.6).

This is a universal quotient of ecology, by no means unique to China. What is unique—and what characterized the dominant theme of the Taihu World Cultural Forum—is the risk to which our species, and our species alone, has exposed the rest of the Creation.

The Chinese know this, both in terms of their glorious shan-shui landscape aesthetic traditions (from Confucius, Mencius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Hseigh Ling-yun, Han-shan, Li Cheng, Kuo Hsi, and so many other luminaries of Chinese literature, painting and philosophy) to the environmental awareness that pervades Chinese rural culture with much the same contemporary reverence and sensitivity one might find in countries as diverse as China's neighboring Bhutan, or in Great Britain, Switzerland, Ecuador or the United States. To some, who know only the pollution of Beijing, the nightlife and commerce of Hong Kong, or the skyscrapers of Shanghai, this might seem off center, but it is not. China is brilliantly in tune with nature and has exactly what it takes to be a world ecological leader.

That is both my personal view, and the overall assessment that emerged at the Second World Cultural Forum, though not without rigorous self-reflection voiced openly at Taihu, all in a clear effort to make future Taihu gatherings the ecological equivalent of the Davos Economic Forum.

With an eight-part Proclamation signed by the delegates, Taihu promises to usher in what is hoped to be a new "ecological civilization" and one which Ambassador Jean-Jacques Subrenat (representing former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin) described as the precursor for much "action" in as much as "awareness is not neutral," or, as Prime Minister Samaras eloquently suggested, what is needed is a move from environmental protection to environmental improvement.

Such invocations from both the Chinese and their guests were the order of the day at Taihu.

This year being the 30th anniversary of bilateral relations between China and Mozambique, President Armando Emilio Guebuza's opening Keynote Address

Fig. 27.7 The New face of Asia. (Photo Credit: © M. C. Tobias)



made it abundantly clear that a flourishing biodiversity—whether in his native African nation, in China, or anywhere on Earth—is “the bedrock... of human civilization.” That should we fail to halt climate change, the many “unknown consequences” will, among other things, impede our ability to enjoy “blue skies,” a metaphor the President employed with unmistakable and fitting poignancy, thus setting the subsequent tone for the entire conference, both by his gravity and his great heart; his ebullience and unwavering “hope” for the world (Fig. 27.7).

The litany of concerns and concomitant convictions raised in Taihu’s two days transcended, even, the June 2012 UN Rio+20 density of wake-up calls, perhaps because there was no time, nor intention to haggle and negotiate.

With Maui’s brilliantly astute, affable and practical Mayor Alan Moriyoshi Arakawa sharing the podium with Pierre Laconte, President of the Foundation for the Urban Environment in Belgium (who stressed the necessity of walking at least 30 min every day) and others, this was a conference focused upon getting the job done; human survival; spiritual freedom; core values of sustainability that transcend greed and economic disparities; that overcome weapons of ecological mass destruction and extinction, redeem biological integrity for all sentient beings, redress what has gone wrong, re-wild our hearts, re-attune our compasses, achieve the achievable, live and let live before it is too late (Fig. 27.8).

Former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, a great environmentalist, human rights champion and original member of the Earth Charter Commission, reflected on how the word “culture” had changed in China during his many years visiting the country; from the days of the “Cultural Revolution” to the new ecological culture sweeping China and so much in evidence at Taihu.

Delegates from outside China—Russia, Estonia, Cuba, across the European Union and the United States—were not a little stunned by the remarkable candor aired by Chinese politicians, scientists, philosophers and cultural historians who each touched upon spirituality and religion; international collaboration; personal emotion; family life and the roots of all cultures as seminal to the enormous challenge of engendering a green, circular, low-carbon, equitable and biologically-restored planet. May 18th was named the official World Ecological Civilization Day.

Fig. 27.8 Former dutch prime minister Ruud Lubbers. (Photo Credit: © J. G. Morrison)

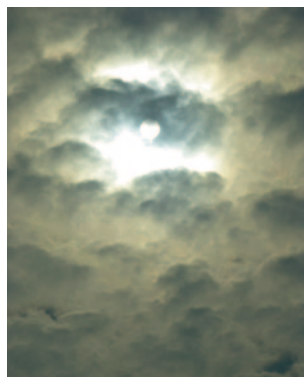


“We must restore the balance of man and Nature—[this is] our dream in China,” Yan Zhaozhu gently intoned (Executive Chairman and Secretary-General of the entire Forum). While Ye Xiaowen, Vice President of the Academy of Chinese Culture, likened this challenge to the “Renaissance,” but one that must get beyond industrialization, urbanization and the consumption of fossil fuels. Those were the vehicles, he described, that delivered prosperity to some but turned humans into “enemies of nature,” a syndrome that today is manifested in poisonous wastes, the measurement of moribund health in parts per million, and outbreaks like SARS coronavirus. The sum total of all that prosperity, said Ye Xiaowen, has become “an ecological crisis plaguing the world.”

This world view, said Matthew Hodes, Director of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, is paramount to a constellation of eco-crises “beyond debate.” Hodes reminded participants that the first three words of the United Nations Charter are “We the Peoples” and sounded a cautionary note by invoking the UN Millennium Development Goal #7 [11] focused on environmental sustainability, particularly for the tens-of-millions of environmental refugees and economically marginalized peoples of the world. Hodes underscored the ecological interdependency of a climate-challenged global population by pointing to the fact that China had just joined the Arctic Council, noting that between 2010 and 2012, Arctic maritime commerce had witnessed ten times the ships and tens times the tonnage of commercial goods, as the ice continued to vanish (Fig. 27.9).

Such cautions were furthered by Dr. Roy Morrison, Director of the Office for Sustainable Development at Southern New Hampshire University, who referenced a world of “ghost cities” and marshaled acute logic on behalf of a “business proposition [that] is simple”—to extract trillions of dollars from obsolete, polluting mechanisms, and mine “savings streams” for natural capital, not destruction. Utilizing citywide utility scales and energy efficiencies, Morrison predicted that we could well hit zero emissions as a civilization within 20 years if we really set our minds and hearts to it, utilizing such instruments as a tax administered by the UN for all per capita emissions exceeding three tons.

Fig. 27.9 Low tropospheric air pollution over Shanghai.
(Photo Credit:
© M. C. Tobias)



Ultimately, the Chinese ecological position was delivered in unadulterated form by Dr. Qu Geping, Chairman of the Environmental and Resources Protection Committee of the National People's Congress. I first met Dr. Qu Geping at his offices in Beijing in the early 1990s when he was the Chairman of the 8th Environmental and Resources Protection Committee of the NPC, a position equivalent to the head of the EPA. Back then he told me that the Chinese had widespread awareness of environmental crises sweeping the nation and that laws were quickly coming into being (Fig. 27.10).

But here in Taihu his message was terse: "I have noticed some progress... [but, so far,] we have failed to avoid the old path. I can say that the situation in China today is extremely severe. China must make tremendous and extra efforts."

Or, as Dr. Ervin Laszlo warned, humanity will become the "first self-endangered species. [But] humanity can evolve and mutate culturally. The nature of crisis is also an opportunity... ."

This biodiversity crisis, involving animal rights and human rights; this overwhelming and unprecedented crisis was the focus of Taihu—an urgent telegram to all of China, to all of the world. Will people read the telegram?

I, too, was a delegate at Taihu along with Jane Gray Morrison. In my address, I expressed the belief that 'we need to be compassionate and non-violent; to be focused upon the biological bottom-line.' I suggested that Hangzhou become a global biodiversity corridor, in keeping with her traditional Garden of Eden ethos; a greenbelt like that surrounding Kyoto, teeming with gardens and wildlife; or like Devonport, New Zealand—the first nuclear-free zone in the world; or Denmark's Samsø, a nearly carbon-neutral island; organic Mendocino, organic wine and olive regions in Spain—Andalusia and La Mancha—or the Haa Valley of Bhutan. A green space like the vast majority of the nation of Suriname, or any Jain monastery across India where Gross National Happiness and a reverence for all living beings reigns supreme.

Is this possible in China? I believe it is. This is a nation whose ancient philosophers echoed century after century that Heaven and Humanity can be one.

Fig. 27.10 Dr. Qu Geping, one of China's greatest ecologists. (Photo Credit: © J. G. Morrison)



Memorably, it was HRH Princess Irene Emma Elisabeth Prinses Van Oranje-Nassau (Princess of the Netherlands) who concluded with deep but unyielding emotion, “We are all nature. Do we remember?”

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