

Mary Evelyn Tucker's Interview with People's Daily

In 2005, Xi Jinping put forward the concept that "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" for the first time in Anji, Zhejiang Province. Nowadays, the "Two Mountains" theory, with "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" at its core, is becoming China's innovative thought on ecological civilization.

Q1. Compared with traditional development concepts at all times and across the world, the concept that "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" unifies economic development and ecological protection. In what aspects does its innovation lie?

From the time of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio in June 1992, the effort to bring ecological protection and economic growth together was established as an aspiration for the global community. The resulting conference document, Agenda 21, set forth a path toward "sustainable development". However, this has been a difficult and contested path, especially as still developing countries have asserted their desire and right to create prosperous economies. The critique of already developed countries has been strong in many quarters, noting that they have contributed to global environmental challenges we now face, especially climate change.

In this context, the Chinese concept of "lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as gold and silver mountains" provides fresh imagery and practices for valuing both ecology and economy. This concept suggests there are complementary processes to guide environmental protection and economic profit, including supporting a green GDP. These are not seen as contradictory or at odds with one another but rather as mutually enhancing. In other words, we

cannot have a healthy economy without a healthy environment. The wellbeing of people and planet are deeply intertwined.

This is the innovative contribution of the Two Mountain policy, which also has resonance in many environmental circles in the West. A dialogue between China and the West could be enhanced by drawing on this integrated perspective with a sense toward creating a planetary framework for mutual flourishing. The Earth Charter is an example of such an international framework that arose from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, The final draft was released at the Hague in 2000 and its 25th anniversary was celebrated there this summer.

2. Against the backdrop of global green transformation, what systematic experience and enlightenment can the "Two Mountains" concept provide for the global community in innovating and adjusting development paths?

In terms of systematic practical experience, China has made focused efforts toward economic development that enhances both the environment and business. As is widely known, this is a motivation in the robust production of solar panels and electric cars, where China leads the world. It is evident in the remarkable fast train system built across China in the last few decades. It can be seen in the clean up of polluted air in cities across the country. It is present in food security issues where some 7,000 organic farms have been established.

It is manifest in reforestation projects in the north such as the reversed desertification of a third of the Kubiqi Desert in the Ordos Basin. Moreover, the Great Green Wall is an ongoing effort to stop sandstorms and the destruction of grasslands. This has included a 3000-kilometer green belt around the Taklamakan Desert of Central Asia. Some of the degraded loess area of the northwest is being restored and now supports sustainable agriculture. This concern for

restoration and reforestation is also present in cities such as Beijing, which is now 49% forested with parks and green spaces.

While much still needs to be done, a direction has been set by the Two Mountain policy that will not be reversed. That is because not only is this happening in applied projects in business, reforestation, pollution cleanup, and agriculture, but also in education. Academic institutions across the country are establishing programs to train people in ecological policy principles and practices. The universities are encouraged to establish departments or institutes supporting ecological civilization through environmental education. The premier academic institution, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has created an institute for Eco-Civilization.

3.Under the guidance of the "Two Mountains" concept, what innovative practices has China put forward? What achievements have these practices yielded, and what significance do they hold for China's building of a modernization characterized by harmonious coexistence between humans and nature?

As a scholar of Confucianism and Chinese history I have been visiting China since 1985 and have witnessed many changes. I have also developed an interest in environmental concerns and action in China during these last three decades. I was fortunate to study with leading Confucian scholars in the West, Wm. Theodore de Bary at Columbia and Thomas Berry at Fordham. They traveled together to China in 1948 to begin their studies in Beijing. Their appreciation of Confucianism along with their interest in the environment has been an inspiration for my work in China with my husband, John Grim, in Ecological Civilization.

Over the last seventy-five years the Chinese government has brought hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. This is a unique achievement in human history. While having positive results in this regard, rapid modernization and industrialization has also had unintended consequences for the environment, namely the pollution of air, water, and soil. The Chinese have responded to this challenge with a 30-year-old policy of Ecological Civilization. This involves a commitment in the Chinese Constitution since 2018 to foster the coordinated development of material, political, spiritual, social and ecological civilization.

What is unique about this integration is the inclusion of so many aspects, which are not always cited in discussions of development. This is especially true of spiritual development. This opens the door to a crucial aspect of human life and inspiration, namely values from ones own cultural traditions. For example, in China the traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are seen as relevant to a more robust ecological understanding of human-nature relations. This is true both historically and at present. That is because without a cultural mindset long lasting environmental change is difficult. As Pan Yue, the former deputy director of the State Environmental Protection Administration acknowledged, “It is difficult to enforce environmental laws without an environmental culture.” This is also a problem that needs to be addressed in the West.

The revival of Confucianism, in particular, is a positive example of drawing on this rich tradition, which has shaped China for millennia, The retrieval and reevaluation of this tradition for Ecological Civilization is present in conferences and publications across China. The Confucian ideal of living in harmony with nature that is shared with Daoism, the imperative to work for the common good, intergenerational concern, the awareness of the importance of

education for a flourishing future, all of these are being highlighted as a moral and spiritual basis for ecological transformation.

This retrieval of the environmental perspectives of these traditions is happening around the world and is the focus of the work of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology for three decades. This began with 10 conferences at Harvard (1996-1998) resulting in 10 books on this topic published by Harvard. Such retrieval will provide a basis for a global dialogue of shared values between cultures and countries. This is an important path not just for genuine sustainable development but for a more comprehensive flourishing of the Earth community. This is the promise of the Two Mountain policy and of the integrated efforts toward creating Ecological Civilization in China and beyond.

4. In the context of worsening ecological crises such as global climate change and biodiversity loss, what contributions has China made in participating in the formulation of rules and frameworks, reshaping the global green governance system, and pioneering new paradigms for global green development?

Because of its dynamic population and economic influence, the future of the planet may well depend on the directions that China will take as a leader of Ecological Civilization in collaboration with other countries. This is an ideal that has traction in China but also potential in the larger human community. That is because there is no planetary future possible without a shared future. This ideal that integrates so many sectors is indispensable for a just and flourishing future based on international cooperation. The inclusion in Ecological Civilization of politics and society along with material and spiritual perspectives in an ecological framework is unique

among nations searching for sustainable ways forward. The Two Mountain theory is essential to this vision. That is because it has traction as an inspiring aspiration with practical application.

5.How can the "Two Mountains" concept provide other countries, especially developing ones, with differentiated and localized theoretical frameworks and practical references?

The Two Mountain concept can be adapted by developing countries by including their own spiritual traditions and practices for culture-based solutions to development challenges. For example, the centuries old Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) of indigenous peoples around the planet can be drawn into management of forests and fisheries as well as protection of sacred places and biodiversity. This is already happening in many countries with great benefit for the bioregions and ecosystems involved. For example, the International Rainforest Initiative collaborates with indigenous people and other spiritually and culturally based groups for protection of the rainforests in the Amazon, the Congo, and Indonesia. Local scientists, politicians, and journalists are also part of these efforts.

"Clear waters and green mountains" and "gold and silver mountains" are not mutually exclusive, and in fact the former can bestow the latter.