

Prometheus Bound: Environmental Crisis and the Developmental State in Modern China

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An apparent paradox defines China's relationship with the natural world. Indigenous philosophical traditions such as Daoism embed humanity within a harmonious and naturalistic cosmos, yet the country suffers from environmental problems far more severe than its Western counterparts. Perhaps nowhere else in the world does environmental praxis diverge so sharply from theory. What is unique about China's developmentalist path, and what does it share in common with other societies? Can traditions like Confucianism and Daoism offer the intellectual resources for a post-growth paradigm in the twenty-first century?

Prometheus Bound develops answers to these questions by examining the ecological constraints on China's growth and proposing an indigenous philosophical basis for green policies. I argue that China's modern environmental crisis began in the early twentieth century when imperial powers such as Great Britain, France, Japan, and the United States threatened the country's survival. In response, the Chinese state embraced a "Promethean political ecology," an unusually strong impulse to transform the natural world in ways that enhance governmental power. Authorities identified minerals, water, soil, and energy as important sources of wealth and power, exploiting these resources to foster economic growth and prevent further encroachment on China's sovereignty. Over time, fear of the European colonial powers gave way to rivalries with imperial Japan and then the Cold War superpowers, but mastering the natural world continued to enable Chinese governments to amass and display the sinews of state power at home and abroad.

Two developmental approaches gave practical expression to these political aims, coexisting in an uneasy tension in the twentieth century. Successive Chinese governments pursued the "modernist developmentalism" implemented on a global scale during the last hundred years. Its principal features included (1) the adoption of a fossil fuel energy regime (2) the use of technocratic planning (3) state management of the "commanding heights" of the economy (4) the quest for capital-intensive industrialization and (5) the promotion of modernizing ideologies that emphasized the conquest of nature. These policies not only yielded the raw materials for economic growth but used the natural environment as a theatrical stage for the performance of state power. Yet ecological constraints in place *before the onset of modern growth* repeatedly forced the Chinese state over the past century to employ an "involutionary developmentalism" defined by low-tech, low cost, labor-intensive principles. Unlike many other societies, China faced extreme population pressures by the early 1800s and possessed proportionally less capital and natural resources to sustain an industrialization program. This involutionary strategy made a virtue of necessity, for example by relying on mass mobilization campaigns during the Maoist era (1949-76) to support steel manufacturing and dam construction. Both approaches helped to create an anthropogenic landscape in China that remains susceptible to rapid deterioration in almost any location.

In the concluding chapter, *Prometheus Bound* suggests that indigenous philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism offer the intellectual resources to create a post-growth paradigm or at least a concept of sustainable development for China. This requires scholars to infuse ancient texts with modern meanings but without violating their essential integrity. The *Analects* proclaims that “the Master fished with a line but did not use a net,” and analysts discern in these lines the broader Confucian commitment to stewardship of the natural world. Of equal utility is the Daoist tradition with its insistence on the fundamental unity of Man, Heaven, and Earth within the Dao, or Way, of the cosmos. The *Daodejing* asserts that “Man follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural.” An amalgam of these two schools can offer a new understanding of humanity and nature in China, with Daoism laying an ontological foundation and Confucianism providing guiding principles for an engaged environmentalism. Perhaps China’s ancient past can save the country from its present and also preserve its future.