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Response to Antón

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Response

Ding Zhaolin

Our conversation here is a nice echo of the old Chinese religion called Taoism. Unlike other religions, the Tao has no idol worship. The ideal state for Taoism is called *Tian Ren He Yi*. *Tian* means nature; *Ren* means human being; *He* is combination and integration; and *Yi* represents a “whole” or perfectness. For Taoists, the integration of man and nature would create a union that is absolutely powerful. A harmonious relationship between man and nature has always been the dream of mankind in ancient and modern times, whether in Asia, Africa, Europe, or in Latin America.

My response to Dr. Antón’s paper is structured in three parts: highlighting his major contributions, indicating some reservations and questions, and, finally, offering my own perspectives on the topic, especially on the Chinese environmental situation.

I. Contributions and Points of Interest

The topic of “Nature, People, and Globalization” is huge. It concerns history, technology, culture, economy, and psychology. It’s not easy to give clear perspectives on such a topic, but Dr. Antón has made an admirable effort. His work offers a rich and interesting perspective on the globalization processes in Latin America, vertically and horizontally, with a particular emphasis on history.

The essay brings important insights to our discussion, as Dr. Antón paints a portrait of the evolution of Latin America as influenced or shaped by Western Europe’s encroachment during the last 500 years. That process brought Latin America something of Western civilization’s scientific, technological, industrial, and information revolutions. But the experience also came with a heavy cost, including the physical and cultural excision of indigenous populations and a ruthless economic pattern of overexploitation of natural resources. By analyzing the phenomenon of megadams in Latin America, for example, Dr. Antón successfully demonstrates the impact of high technology and the information revolution on the environment of Latin America. Further, he highlights issues of the Amazon, one of the few tropical rain forests left on earth. The Amazonian region, which was considered a

principal climate conditioner of the earth, is now a major environmental concern not only of Latin America, but of the whole world.

I agree with Dr. Antón that major environmental problems of Latin America, such as deforestation, soil erosion, water contamination, and overfishing, are the result not only of socioeconomic processes, but also of the consequence of official policies that promote the occupation of forest lands and the exploitation of local resources by foreign or national companies. Undoubtedly, local governments and companies must share the blame for causing the degradation of the environment. On the other hand, multinational companies, companions of the latest wave of globalization, also have undeniable responsibility for environmental problems.

Recent studies indicate that 70 percent of world trade is now in the hands of just 500 corporations, which also control 80 percent of foreign investment. Multinational companies have taken the lead in exploiting world resources. Their activities have a strong impact on the world ecosystem, especially in less developed countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Those multinational companies especially involved with intensive consumption of natural resources and the generation of environmental pollution are moving to developing countries in the name of investment or globalization. For instance, the *Economist* reveals that a German pharmaceutical company has for more than twenty years been using a wild plant from the Amazon to make a product to treat glaucoma. Yet the company has not put a penny into research or the continued development of the plant, which is now close to extinction.

II. Reservations and Questions

Dr. Antón's essay is profound. His insights allow those of us who are not familiar with Latin America to quickly grasp something important about its history, particularly its relations with Western Europe. However, I am still without a full or adequate understanding of the whole concept of *globalization*. Regrettably, I could not find a clear definition of globalization in the context of the essay.

I do not believe Dr. Antón would agree that globalization is simply a one-way process in which Western countries influence Latin American politics, economics, culture, and the environment. Rather, globalization must be seen as at least a two-way process in which economies and cultures of various societies are integrated. Had he provided a

more clear, complete, and encompassing definition of globalization, the essay would afford the reader a better comprehension of the significance of the processes of the last five centuries in Latin America.

On the issue of the environment, globalization undoubtedly has a strong impact on deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and degradation of the ecosystem. On the other hand, environmental change can have a negative impact on globalization as, for instance, in the matter of global warming. Some scientists predict that in the next century, the world will experience climate changes on a global scale because of the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of forests. It could have a disastrous impact on human life, and it is likely to leave no country untouched if the issue is left unaddressed. Global ecosystems are integrated and interrelated. The degradation of one area could affect others, no matter their status as a developed or developing country. This situation forces the world to work as a whole in combating the degradation of any part of the environment. This reality was the impetus behind the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

To date, more than 150 countries have signed both the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. It marks the first time that the heads of states of almost all the countries in the world have come together to discuss a common goal. This may have profound influence on the process of globalization. Unfortunately, Dr. Antón neglects to explore this important event.

III. China and the Environment

In the last two decades, as China opened its doors to the outside world, it inevitably opened the door to globalization as well. Since China has one-fourth of the world's population, its activities and policies are of interest and concern to the world—just as China is increasingly concerned about the world around it.

Lester Brown, president of the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, has recently published a book titled *Who Will Feed China? Wake-up Call for a Small Planet*. He has some interesting descriptions of relations between China and the rest of the world. He says, "Two more beers per person in China would take the entire Norwegian grain harvest. And if the Chinese were to consume seafood at the same rate as the Japanese do, China would need the annual world fish catch."¹

Brown goes on to write, "In an integrated world economy, China's rising food prices will become the world's rising food prices. China's land scarcity will become everyone's land scarcity. And water scarcity in China will affect the entire world."²

I don't think patriotic Chinese like me can be expected to be delighted by that scenario. However, as an old Chinese proverb says, "Good medicine can be bitter to your mouth; good advice can be rough to your ear." This is the reality we have to face. There is no escaping China's involvement with the transformations of the modern world.

With the background of an open-door policy and economic reform, and acceptance of the wave of globalization, more Chinese are becoming aware of the damage being done to the environment. They have more knowledge about environmental protection and have begun to react to environmental concerns.

One of the signs of progress is a book titled *China on the Edge: The Crisis of Ecology and Development* by He Bochuan, a professor at Zhongshan University in southern China. He presents a disturbing view of the ecological problems in China, problems he believes stem from government policy errors, gross mismanagement, inefficiency, and waste. Bochuan warns, "After years of mismanaged development, unparalleled growth in population, and inexorably expanding urban areas, China's environment, water resources, air, soil, and forests are indeed reaching the point of no return."³

This monograph has become a bestseller in China. More than 400,000 copies were printed in a short period, which is unprecedented for an academic work. Reportedly, it has become a "must read" for Chinese officials on all levels, although some may not be happy with it.

Another topic of interest is the Three Gorge Dam on China's largest river, the Changjiang (Yangzi) River. Acknowledged to become the world's largest dam, this project's impact on the ecosystem in the Changjiang River Valley has triggered wide debate in China. Although the decade-long debate ended with the defeat of the environmentalists who were against its construction, the dam has played an unprecedented role in raising the ecological sensitivities of the Chinese people, who hardly had any idea of environmental protection through the fifties, sixties, and seventies, when they believed that such problems afflicted only capitalist countries.

While many countries in the world began to pay attention to environmental problems in the 1960s and 1970s, China was heavily involving itself in the so-called Cultural Revolution. Most Chinese, including

government officials and academics, had no idea of the need for environmental protection. It was only after the open-door policy had been carried out that China began to monitor its environment. We have come to realize that we are surrounded by environmental problems that require attention.

Land Scarcity

With an arable land area of 0.08 hectares per person in 1990, China is one of the world's most densely populated countries in agronomic terms. Even worse, the cropland in China is shrinking at a rapid pace. According to the statistics of China's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), the total arable land in China has decreased at the rate of 822,000 acres per year as a result of soil erosion, industrial expansion, urbanization, and pollution.

With the rapid development of industrialization in the last decade, cropland has been sacrificed to construct thousands of factories and warehouses. With more and more individual Chinese having the means to buy private vehicles, a vast area of cropland will be sacrificed for roads and parking lots.

In addition, the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has resulted in the abandonment of environmentally friendly traditional farming methods. This is a trend that leads to the widespread deterioration of farmland. The combination of a continually expanding population and shrinking of cropland directly threatens the food supply of 1.2 billion people.

Water Shortage and Pollution

Although China's water resources are fairly large in absolute terms, when prorated per capita, the share is relatively modest. It is further reduced when one considers the uneven distribution of resources, not to mention the enormous water demands from agriculture and industry, which have grown sixfold in the last four decades.

Now at least 200 large cities have an inadequate water supply, and the situation is worse throughout northern China, including the capital city of Beijing. In recent years, demand has increased by about 7 percent annually, but the water supply has declined by 5 percent per year. The current shortfall in Beijing is around 800 million cubic meters and could reach 1.2 billion cubic meters by the year 2000.

To deal with these shortages, China has to construct water diversion projects to bring water from long distances to support big cities. For instance, the water supply in China's third largest city, Tianjin, is polluted, so the city brings water from the Luanhe River hundreds of kilometers away. Moreover, because too many water reservoirs have been built in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, the principal stream in north China, water levels have been falling steadily since the early 1980s. In 1987, for a record 37 days, there was actually no water flowing through the river into Bohai Bay. Obviously, the irrigated land in the lower reaches of the river suffered greatly from the shortage.

In addition to quantitative decline, water pollution has made the situation even worse. A survey by NEPA shows that 85.9 percent of the total river length of 55,000 kilometers is unsuitable for drinking or fishing; 47 percent did not meet national standards; 23.7 percent was unsuitable for irrigation; and 4.3 percent was found to be severely polluted.

Air Pollution

Visitors to China, especially the big cities, can easily detect the air pollution: the sky is a grayish hue; there is always smoke hanging over major city roads; and the smell of vehicle gas emissions irritates pedestrians' noses. In winter and spring, some women in Beijing use veils to cover their faces to keep from inhaling dust and dirty air.

The main source of air pollution in China is coal combustion. The Chinese consume about 580 million tons of coal annually as fuel for industrial and domestic use. Most of the raw coal goes directly into factories and home stoves without washing or other processing. Air pollution levels in Beijing and other Chinese cities are many times higher than international standards. In my interviews with Chinese students and scholars studying here in the United States, most mentioned air pollution as one of the major reasons they were reluctant to return to China. This came as a great surprise since it had never occurred to me that air pollution could be a driving force behind China's brain drain.

Deforestation

According to official figures, forests now cover only 12 percent of China, compared with 33 percent in the United States and 26 percent in

India, and the pace of our deforestation is much faster than that of many countries. In last two decades, forest areas in China have shrunk by over 23 percent and usable timber reserves have declined by 22 percent. Experts warn that the forest coverage in China could drop to 8.3 percent by the year 2000.

Even the *People's Daily* has begun to carry articles warning of the growing danger of deforestation. One report said the annual consumption of 10.6 billion cubic feet of timber for fuel, building, and paper production far exceeded growth of just 7 billion cubic feet. If this rate of consumption continues, the newspaper warns, many timber enterprises will have nothing to log by the end of the century.

Obviously, deforestation has had a highly negative impact on wildlife. The Chinese forestry ministry reported that in 1962, sixty species were threatened with extinction. The number has now risen to 300, including the giant panda. Increasing soil erosion is the other consequence of deforestation. More than 5.6 billion tons of soil are lost each year. One-sixth of the total area of China is now affected.

IV. Challenges and Solutions

In dealing with the environmental problems, the first challenge is financial. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representative who is in charge of the UN's environmental projects in China once told me that to solve environmental problems, the first obstacle is money, the second is money, and the third is money! China has not only serious environmental problems, but also a severe shortage of money.

Since China is involving itself fully in the process of rapid industrialization, it will require large amounts of capital. Inevitably, that will raise a great and most basic question: Which deserves more capital investment—economic expansion and growth or environmental protection?

The second challenge is for the government to gain acceptance for its strategy, especially on the provincial and prefectural levels. There is a tendency for many local authorities to sacrifice long-term environmental interests for local economic gain. As a result, new technology is not being used to fundamentally transform the industrial base, but rather is earmarked for expensive and redundant consumer products. The unhealthy pattern of high input, high consumption, and pollution continues to threaten the environment.

The third challenge is environmental education. Although the central government and academics have become fully aware of the significance of protecting the environment, there is no widespread acceptance or understanding of it. To help the majority of Chinese establish a sense of environmental protection will be difficult, especially among peasants.

China is dotted with thousands of small, dangerous sources of industrial water and air pollution. Most of them are small rural and suburban manufacturing enterprises with almost no concern about environmental pollution because of the lack of education. As a result, tons of pollutants have been released into local canals, streams, and lakes used for crop irrigation and drinking water. Although the government has been trying to close some of these enterprises, it is not easy since they are major absorbers of surplus peasant labor and are essential to local economies.

Obviously, China's environmental problems will not be solved overnight. It will take time, money, and effort. The Chinese government's adoption of "Prevention First" as the primary principle of environmental policy is a good beginning, and many environmental laws and regulations covering air, water, and forests have been enacted. They have played an important role in moderating the pollution trend in China during the last decade.

Meanwhile, China has been increasingly cooperating with the rest of world. An environmental network connecting the Chinese government and universities to sites in North America, Europe, and Japan is planned for the next few years.

Again, this is only a start. Much work remains to be done. The path leading to a clean and sustainable environment, in this era of globalization, will be long and arduous.

Notes

1. Lester R. Brown, *Who Will Feed China?: Wake-up Call for a Small Planet* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), 30.
2. *Ibid.*, 32.
3. He Bochuan, preface to *China on the Edge: The Crisis of Ecology and Development* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, 1991).