The nature of the Tao and sustainable development. (Observations by a visitor from Europe)

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My experience with sustainability and Taoism goes back to the early 1980s, when I frequently visited the island of Taiwan – at that time the “economic miracle of the Far East”. However, I noticed the implications of a government engaging in spectacular economic growth over several decades without taking into account the ecological factor. The air, the rivers and the soil were polluted to an extent that you could smell and see this everywhere, whilst the record number of people suffering from hepatitis, as well as the damage to biodiversity, were all alarming.

My observation was that the balance between ecology and economy was seriously disturbed, in conflict with the yin/yang principle.

At the same time, visiting many of the Temples on the island I became aware of the culture of Taoism and started to read texts from Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, both emphasizing the harmony between Heaven, Nature and Humanity.
These two different encounters with the Chinese world were puzzling to me and as a result I became involved in a three-year study in Taiwan, leading to a report that was published in 1989, titled *Taiwan 2000: Matching Economic Growth with Environmental Protection*. At that time, Taoism was not a major factor for the Chinese scholars participating in the study. I had to wait for 25 years to see that happen. In China. Today.

The concept of sustainable development was formulated in the United Nations Report *Our Common Future* that was produced, with China’s participation in 1987:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

As early as the first century, Taoism developed institutions and regulations in the ‘One Hundred and Eighty Precepts’ with the purpose of protecting the environment and to ensure that its natural balance would not be destroyed. It purposely advocated respect for women and children, for all forms of animal life, for all plants, for the earth, for mountains, rivers, forests and sought to preserve and protect them. These rules and institutions may be the earliest significant and conscious efforts of human civilization to protect the natural environment and to ensure the adaption of culture to nature instead of the opposite.

So, the Taoists in China were very early in working on sustainable development.

The record of achievements of the China Taoist Association in revitalizing the traditional respect for nature in China in recent years is extremely impressive and can be summarized in the following milestones:

- **In 1995** the China Taoist Association created the Declaration on the Environment.

- **In 2006** the first and new Tiejieshu Ecological Taoist Temple at the foot of Taibai Mountain was ritually inaugurated and representatives of ten temples in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces in Central China, the Qinling Declaration was signed.

- **In 2008**, 69 representatives from Chinese Taoist temples, pagodas and associations gathered together in Mao Shan, and signed the Mao Shan Declaration, a 10-year specific commitment, in six major regions of China.
In 2009, the China Taoist Association presented the China Taoist Ecology Protection Eight Year Plan at a major gathering at Windsor Castle in the United Kingdom. This memorable occasion was a major milestone by reaching national consensus on how to proceed for the next 8 years, ending in 2017, to fulfill the commitments that are extensively described in the plan.

In concluding this presentation I would like to express my gratitude and friendship to Master Ren of Louguantai temple, who pioneered the first Tiejieshu Taoist Ecology Temple project with great passion and perseverance and who offered me the opportunity in 2004 to participate in making his dream of a contemporary ecological future for Taoism to come true.

All of this would not have happened if Martin Palmer had not invited me in 2003 to join ARC in its global effort to engage the major faith institutes in the world to commit themselves to the conservation of nature. I sincerely hope that the nature of the Tao will contribute to achieving a sustainable world for all humanity.

And humanity is playing with time

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