

# Reconnecting the economic, ecological, social and cultural pillars of Chinese society

by Allerd Stikker  
International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA) workshop  
September 9, 2013  
Song Shan, China

In the history of Western civilization, the past two centuries have seen a wave of man-made, science-based technologies. These inventions include the steam engine and combustion engine, enabling us to transform natural resources into energy and power. They also include large-scale mechanisation and artificial fertilisation – which have allowed us to transform small-scale, integrated farming into industrial agriculture. More recently, communication technologies have surged ahead and the electronic media have revolutionised global information exchange.

Together, these technological advancements have led to staggering growth in economic welfare for more than one billion people, mostly in the West although the non-Western world is quickly catching up. On top of this, the world population has grown exponentially from two billion to seven billion inhabitants in the past hundred years.

Such developments set off alarm bells at the Club of Rome and the United Nations in the second half of the 20th century and resulted in two publications, namely *The Limits to Growth*, which appeared in 1972, and *Our Common Future*, which came out in 1987. The reports were very specific in their analyses and recommendations. They urged us to rethink the course humanity had chosen. It was projected that, unless we changed our course, the next 50 years could witness a disastrous collapse of the ecosystems supporting human life on earth. Unfortunately, this message was a bridge too far for most politicians, entrepreneurs and private citizens. The Rio Conference in 1992 and the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 followed the Club of Rome and UN initiatives. But these were still largely top-down strategies that did not and still do not sufficiently reach individual citizens.

Interestingly enough, the 1987 report *Our Common Future* and subsequent global conferences promoted a new balance between nature and humanity, and emphasized the loss of integrity in the world's economic, ecological and social evolution. But they did not call on the world's religions and cultures in their appeal for a joint effort.

Today, the problems loom as large as ever and matching economic growth with environmental protection and social harmony continues to be a daunting task. This is the case even though our economic and political leadership is slowly but gradually becoming aware of the "inconvenient truth" that fundamental changes are needed if we are to avoid a collapse of human society on a worn-out planet.

What has happened is that the economic, ecological, social and cultural pillars of human civilization have become disconnected in an environment where specialization is the norm, where the educational system is split up into science and humanities and where humanity is losing sight of how everything in the human body, in human society, in nature and in the whole universe is interconnected and interdependent. If we are to resolve this dilemma, we need to encourage a bottom-up approach through a renewed awareness on the part of individuals themselves, rather than an autocratic top-down approach.

How can we recover true human nature and human society and so recover the coherence and harmony of our daily lives? Here, I can see a very specific role for the International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA). This organization is ideally placed to help translate the principles of New Confucian Humanism into practice in present-day Chinese society through its network within the world of government, the business community, the education sector and the non-governmental sphere.

I'd like to give you some examples of how the Ecological Management Foundation (EMF), one of my own organizations, has promoted reconnecting the pillars at a time when the cultural pillar was mostly neglected.

First of all: reconnecting economy and ecology at a national level. From 1987 to 1989, EMF was the initiator and a strategic partner in an environmental project in Taiwan. The project involved National Taiwan University, the government, the private sector and several foreign experts, and its main goal was to come up with a new economic model. The outcome was a report called *Matching Economic Growth with Environmental Protection* and the establishment of an Environmental Protection Administration for the first time ever.

My second example takes me to the Netherlands and is about reconnecting economy and ecology at the level of the private sector. In 1992/1993, EMF partnered with the Netherlands Bankers Association and ING Bank to develop a program with two specific ecological goals. On the one hand, it institutionalized the environmentally sound in-house management of energy, water and transport. And on the other hand, it developed and implemented a credit-rating system that incorporated environmental risk into the evaluation of finance requests from the business sector. The underlying principle was that environmentally sound management is always economically sound in the long run but also, very often, in the short run as well.

Then between 2000 and 2002, EMF initiated the creation of a "CEO Panel on Industry and Water" together with 13 major multinational companies that were either major suppliers or users in the water sector. The goal of the panel was to develop corporate water policies that would promote awareness of a more careful and socially acceptable use of our scarce clean water resources and would lead to significant financial savings as well.

A few years later, EMF became aware of the significance of religion and culture when it began to work with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) on environmental education programs in faith-related schools in Africa. It started in 2007 with clean drinking water and sanitation issues, which led to collaboration with UNICEF in their

WASH program. Since then, the program has expanded into the present-day goal of education in the broader field of nature conservation. It produced a handbook, which is now available.

I'll give one final example of what EMF has done to help reconnect ecology and religion. In 2005-2011, EMF joined ARC in assisting the Taoists in China with the establishment of a Daoist Ecological Temple Alliance. There are now Daoist temple communities all over China, who in turn have set up Environmental Education Centres. They have also drawn up an 8-year environmental plan, which the China Taoist Association presented at an international Windsor Castle event in 2009. The network of the Daoist Ecological Temple Alliance is still expanding today.

While in previous decades the religious and cultural dimensions of civilization remained mostly "under the radar", now the time has come to engage this fourth fundamental pillar of society as we search for solutions that will allow us to recover lost relationships. It is a dynamic challenge for the International Confucian Ecological Alliance and a unique opportunity and time to put theory into practice.

EMF and its affiliated network and partners would be glad to assist if and when required, in collaboration with ARC.

Allerd Sticker,  
September, 2013

*More details on*

<http://www.emf.nl> and [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)