

Teaching Thoreau in China:
Waldensian Reflections on Chinese Ecology and Agriculture
By Jeffrey Bilbro

It may seem quixotic to try teaching *Walden*, the archetypal American ode to self-reliance and wildness, in Wuhan, one of China's largest industrial cities. Nevertheless, I was excited when I found out I would have the opportunity to give a series of lectures on Thoreau at Wuhan University of Technology, the third largest university in China. This would give me the chance to discuss pressing ecological and cultural issues in the context of one of the most rapidly industrializing countries in the world. China's environmental problems are widely reported, and if China can't find a way to develop its vast economy more sustainably, then the entire world will suffer the consequences. And as I discovered, Thoreau provided me with a helpful perspective from which to understand China's ecological, agricultural, and political situation. Before proceeding, though, let me offer a *caveat lector*: I'm no expert on China; these are merely the reflections of an American literature professor who spent three weeks viewing the complicated, paradoxical country of China through the lens of *Walden*.

During my first two lectures, I introduced the tension that Thoreau develops in the first few chapters between nature and industry. I drew on Leo Marx's classic reading of the railroad passages in *Walden* to suggest that Thoreau moved out to Walden in part to seek a way to harmonize America's burgeoning industry with its natural environment and agrarian cultural virtues (249-55). For instance, in an important passage in the chapter "Sounds," Thoreau writes a long sentence describing the various sounds he hears as he sits by the pond:

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by two and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fish hawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither; and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country. (159-60)

In this one sentence, Thoreau tries to hold together the birds and other animals with the train that runs close by the pond. He even compares the sound of the train to the sound of a partridge being flushed, but his attempt to reconcile nature and industry (figured by the train) founders, and he concludes later in this chapter that because the train represents those forces that commodify and exploit nature, he must turn his back on it: "I must get off the track and let the cars go by; . . . I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke

and steam and hissing” (167-68). I explained, then, that at the beginning of his experiment, Thoreau fails to find a way to incorporate the train into his natural, simple way of life. Industry and nature seem irredeemably opposed.

This opposition describes modern China pretty well also, and their railroad system is a profound example of their rapid industrialization. Trains are big in modern China. According to Wikipedia, a site that somewhat surprisingly isn’t blocked in China, the country has over 11,000 kilometers of high-speed rail, the largest in the world (“[Railroad Transport](#)”). While in China, I read an article in City Lab about China’s rapid expansion of high-speed trains which reported that the government is even contemplating building a train from Beijing to North America, facilitated by a 200 kilometer tunnel under the Bering Strait ([Kuo](#)). The article, however, failed to mention where passengers were going to go once they arrived in the permafrost of Alaska. It’s doubtful that this plan will be realized, but it’s the kind of grand industrial vision that makes China a scary place ecologically.

Based on what I had heard from other visitors to China, I expected to experience apocalyptic levels of pollution in Wuhan, but when we arrived, I was pleasantly surprised by the only slightly hazy skies. Wuhan University of Technology actually has a fairly wooded campus. We lived in an unattractive block-style apartment, but every morning outside our window the trees were filled with birds serenading the sunrise. If I ignored the construction noise, I could look out our window and imagine we were in a city with a fairly healthy environment.

Ignoring the construction noise wasn’t easy, however. Construction cranes are indeed ubiquitous and dominate the skyline, not only in Wuhan, but in every city we visited. China turns out cookie-cutter apartment high rises at a mind-boggling rate, and they still can’t keep up with the demand. We heard several stories of people’s apartments increasing in value by ten fold in ten years. While I had never heard of Wuhan before making arrangements to teach here, it is one of the 30 or 40 largest cities in the world and is growing rapidly; it’s hard to describe what it feels like to be always surrounded by the masses of people that crowd these booming Chinese cities. And I soon discovered that the relatively clear air we had on our arrival in Wuhan was thanks to a heavy rain the previous day. After a few dry days, the air became dense and stank, and the tops of the tallest buildings were hidden in a brown cloud.

High rises join the brown water
 Of the Yangtze to the brown air,
 And Yellow Crane Tower is shadowed
 By countless construction cranes.
 Relentless torrents of people spill
 Over bridges, pour through streets,
 Burst from subway exits, threaten
 To drown any sense of the individual
 Under constantly moving, rising masses.

On our first weekend, we took a train from Wuhan to Hefei (yes, I am aware of the irony inherent in our mode of travel), and I was struck by how much land still appears to be under traditional, small-scale farming methods. While we saw some large, machine-cultivated fields, most of the agricultural land was divided into small plots, many of them terraced. Small, terraced fields don't lend themselves to large machines, and rice cultivation in particular resists mechanization, at least thus far. We saw water buffalo and other livestock grazing in fields interspersed with rice and vegetable plots. Thus, what Wes Jackson calls the "eyes to acres" ratio is much higher in China (at least in the south, where rice is the dominate crop) than in America, and perhaps China's diet and agricultural conditions will enable its land to escape the worst depredations of large-scale industrial farming ([Jackson](#)). Still, as I watched farmers tilling their plots under a constant haze, I couldn't help but wonder how the polluted air and water might be affecting the food grown here.

European settlers to America never established the sustainable, small-scale farming practices that have enabled the Chinese to be "farmers of forty centuries," as F. H. King puts it. The "permanent agriculture" practiced in China has lasted so long because the farmers have found ways to maintain the soil's fertility. Thus Chinese farmers, with their long, sophisticated agricultural tradition, have been able to resist the temptations of industrial agriculture more effectively than American farmers, recently transplanted from Europe, could during the industrialization that occurred after the second world war. So although northern China's different conditions have lent themselves more to mechanized farming, there seems to be some hope that the Chinese will be able to resist the lure of urbanization that so decimated the rural population and agricultural practices in America, as documented by Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and Wendell Berry. On the other hand, in talking with Chinese students, I kept hearing about the rapid migration from rural poverty to urban opportunities, and this narrative seems to be increasing its hold on the young people.

From my train window
 I see farmers hoeing vegetables,
 tending rice paddies. Each
 wears a peasant's hat
 fulfilling my stereotyped image.
 I cannot imagine the life
 they lead, the toils and joys,
 the tedium and beauty they endure.
 Millennia of tradition separate
 us—only this window unites us.

China doesn't really have wilderness. While China is only marginally larger than the US, it has well over four times as many people. Given their large population and long history, most of the country has an ancient tradition of human involvement. In particular, their irrigation programs go back millennia, and the terraced rice fields reflect generations of farmers shaping the land. So while China has a beautiful countryside and spectacular mountains, "wilderness" doesn't play much of a role in their cultural imagination. But America's infatuation with wilderness and the "uninhabited" frontier may not be entirely good; perhaps our belief that we have vast areas of pristine land in reserve leads us to believe that we have permission to abuse our land, farming it with methods that cause severe topsoil loss, and building sprawling suburbs that use land quite inefficiently. Thus, in China, the pastoral life remains more figurative than literal. Our hosts took us fishing in a nearby fish farm, and while it was enjoyable to pull carp out of the murky water, it wasn't quite like fly-fishing in my native, mountain-fed Washington streams.

Literally moving to Walden Pond and living in a more natural setting was crucial to Thoreau's experiment, however. This literal dimension to the pastoral, as Leo Marx points out, remains a vital part of American culture (3-4). America is no shining exemplar of sustainable development, but for a variety of reasons—one big one being the paucity of our population in comparison with China—we still have large areas of relatively wild land. My dad has worked at IBM for 30 years, and we grew up in the Seattle suburbs, but when all of us kids were still living at home, he and my mom decided to leave Seattle for a year and move our family to an isolated community named Stehekin nestled within North Cascades National Park in central Washington. There are no roads into this community—to get there you have to take a 4-hour boat ride, fly on a float plane, or hike about 16 miles—and when we lived there, there was no phone or internet access. So the 80 people who lived up there year-round form a tight community, and they welcomed us into their lives. We learned how to make long bows from local vine maples, how to tie flies to imitate the native bugs, did lots of cross-country skiing (at one point, we had nine feet of snow on the ground at our house), and formed life-long friends. I was eleven when we moved to Stehekin, and it was a boy's paradise. So for me, the American, romantic dream of living off the land was literally imaginable. I knew men who had run trap lines.

Thoreau's experiment at Walden thus resonated with my own experience, and while in China we did our best to find a more remote, mountainous area to visit. We took a train and then a bus from Wuhan to Huangshan, a rugged, forbidding range of mountains. It was beautiful but certainly not wild. Over the past decades, Huangshan was clearly developed for mass crowds. We took a cable car up to the mountain (one of three different cable cars erected on different sides of the mountain), and then walked about an hour, up and down many steps, to a surprisingly luxurious hotel. Everything for this hotel was carried up on foot, either from the base of the mountain or at least from the cable car station, and the paths were wide and paved gracefully

with stones. Enormous numbers of laborers would have been required to develop this remote place. And judging from the crowds of people we shared the paths with, it's a popular place for Chinese people to go and enjoy some fresh air. Indeed it was an incredibly beautiful place, where despite the crowds of people around us, we experienced what Thoreau calls the "tonic of wildness."

The pine trees on Huangshan
 extend their boughs in welcome
 to the mist. In return,
 each needle receives a drop.

While Thoreau musters intense moral outrage over his government's failings, most Chinese people exhibit a surprising—to my American eyes—lack of interest in political reform. Of course the moral failing that Thoreau was most upset about was his government's support of African-American slavery, hence his refusal to pay the poll tax that led to his famous night spent in jail. Yet while I discussed Thoreau's views on the place of civil disobedience, this seemed like a very odd concept to the Chinese. They just don't seem to want to be involved in politics. One of my Chinese friends concurred when I suggested that most Chinese, as long as the government is delivering basic services, don't have a desire to know what's going on politically. In this respect, the Communist Party seems to be successful in following the advice of the Daoist sage Lao Tzu: "The more knowledge people have, the harder they are to rule" (223). Thus the American mantra "question authority" sounds foreign to the Chinese culture. Thoreau's bombastic claim that he has "yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors" rather shocked my Chinese students who have a deep respect for their elders and ancestors. In the West, many of the stories we hear from China are about political dissidents, but in China itself, these voices seem absent.

One story that broke while we were in China illustrated this general acceptance of authority. Russia and China signed a long term agreement for Russia to export natural gas to China. The terms of the deal, including the exact price China would pay for the gas, weren't released. A Chinese editorial on the subject concluded that this was wise: "To say whether the price is 'expensive' or 'cheap' will satisfy one side but upset the other. Maintaining ambiguity will help maintain a good social effect of the signing" ("[China Media](#)"). This practice is common in China and helps both sides save face. But if an energy deal of this magnitude happened in America, the public would demand to know all the details of the agreement. Consider the ongoing negotiations over the Keystone XL pipeline, in which the exact route is the subject of intense, public discussion. Thoreau's biting critiques of a slaveholding government and his advocacy of civil disobedience is part of what appears—in comparison to China's political landscape at any rate—to be a vibrant tradition of public discussion in America. Such discussion seems crucial in helping a culture deliberate on what goals it

wants to pursue and at what ecological costs. Without such debate, these important decisions get made in secret by the powerful and wealthy. Of course, to those of us who live in America, it often seems that such decisions are still made by the powerful and wealthy, regardless of whatever public debate goes on. So maybe all our talk isn't that much of an improvement on China; at least they're honest about their secrecy.

At the end of one lecture, one of the attendees came up to me and told me about Hai Zi, a Chinese poet who committed suicide while carrying a copy of Thoreau's *Walden*. Later, I did some research and discovered that in 1989, at the age of 25, Hai Zi laid himself on a railroad track with a bag containing four books, one of which was *Walden*. The form of his suicide certainly seems inspired by Thoreau's extended critique of his society's enthusiasm for trains and industrialization. But whereas Thoreau, at the beginning of *Walden*, declares "I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by [the train's] smoke and steam and hissing," and therefore "I must get off the track and let the cars go by," Hai Zi apparently could imagine no way of stepping off the tracks of rapid, wholesale industrialization and the fragmentation this caused in the agricultural communities and cultures in which he grew up. When I mentioned Hai Zi to one of the professors who was hosting me, he criticized him for being too naive about the need for China to industrialize and develop its economy: "Hai Zi's death was a personal tragedy, not a cultural tragedy," he told me. And indeed, Hai Zi did appear to struggle with mental illness in the years preceding his suicide. Nevertheless, his poetry recalls a world of agriculture, community, and nature being damaged by rapid industrialization, and his mental illness may certainly have been related to these political concerns. In a haunting poem written only two months before his death, Hai Zi gets to the root of why industrialization can be so damaging: it makes contentment increasingly difficult.

Facing the Ocean, Spring Warms Flowers Open

starting from tomorrow, become a content person
 feed the horses, split wood, roam the world
 starting from tomorrow, I'll concern myself with grains and vegetables
 I have a home, facing the ocean, spring warms flowers open

starting from tomorrow, I'll write letters to all the relatives
 to tell them of my contentedness
 what that the content lightning flash told me
 I will tell everyone

give a warm name to every river and every mountain
 strangers, I send you my blessings
 I hope for you a splendid future

I hope that your lovers become family
 I hope that in this dusty world you become content
 I only hope to face the ocean, as spring warms and flowers open (219)

Because we were in Beijing in the days leading up to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the “June 4th Incident,” security was very tight in the capital, and we witnessed a heavy police presence. We saw police run random checks on passengers in the Beijing subway; apparently, citizens must carry their ID cards at all times. While we were always spared these searches, maybe because we are so obviously tourists, it reminded me that in many ways, China is a police state.

Yet the Chinese culture is incredibly hospitable, and our friends and hosts treated us royally during our stay in Wuhan. Professors and students took us out for elaborate meals, invited us into their homes, and showed us around the city. We were amazed at how warmly they welcomed us and treated us as part of their families. For the Chinese, food is an integral part of showing hospitality; Thoreau’s method of fasting whenever he had more than one guest because he couldn’t cook for more than two people wouldn’t work well in China. And their hospitality extended beyond just meals. The residents of Wuhan were extremely friendly, and even the security staff at the Beijing airport were much kinder than most staff in American airports. We greatly enjoyed our stay in China in large part because of the warm, welcoming people.

The word that Chinese people most often use to describe their culture is “harmonious,” and indeed, in many ways, this seems to be accurate. But at times, the harmony I heard sounded like a simplified harmony, engineered by repressing certain tones, rather than a vibrant, organic harmony. In spite of the genuine friendliness of individual Chinese people, I began finding this “harmonious” society stifling in certain respects. I like to ask different people the same question when I travel so that I can triangulate their answers and get a fuller sense of the culture, but this wasn’t particularly effective in China because I typically got the exact same answer. This was true of big issues, like US foreign policy or the evil Japanese government or the one-child policy, but it also held true for minor things. For such a large, geographically diverse country, China seems remarkably unified culturally.

In contrast, Thoreau’s notion of harmony includes diversity and wildness. One of his goals in going to Walden was to tune his ear to hear the natural harmony around him. Near the end of the book, he describes hearing an owl respond to a goose flying overhead:

One night in the beginning of winter, before the pond froze over, about nine o’clock, I was startled by the loud honking of a goose, and, stepping to the door, heard the sound of their wings like a tempest in the woods as they flew low over my house. They passed over the pond toward Fair Haven, seemingly deterred from settling by my light, their commadore honking all the while with a regular beat. Suddenly an unmistakable cat-owl from very near me, with the

most harsh and tremendous voice I ever heard from any inhabitant of the woods, responded at regular intervals to the goose, as if determined to expose and disgrace this intruder from Hudson's Bay by exhibiting a greater compass and volume of voice in a native, and *boo-hoo* him out of Concord horizon. What do you mean by alarming the citadel at this time of night consecrated to me? Do you think I am ever caught napping at such an hour, and that I have not got lungs and a larynx as well as yourself? *Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, boo-hoo!* It was one of the most thrilling discords I ever heard. And yet, if you had a discriminating ear, there were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard. (319-20)

Thoreau's wordplay here on the name of his town, Concord, reveals that the apparent discord of the goose's honk and the owl's *boo-boo* actually reveals a wild concord. Because of the time he'd spent in the woods, Thoreau's discriminating ear could discern the underlying harmony even in this seemingly cacophonous exchange. Similarly, America's culture and political process can often appear cacophonous, full of partisan rancor, but after getting a taste of Chinese "harmony," I began to hear America's discord as the sound of healthy debate; it may be ugly at times, but it seems more honest and healthy than agreement maintained by suppressing differences.

Another way that I began to think of this paradox underlying China's "harmonious" culture was through Thoreau's use of water imagery in Walden. Thoreau's rich descriptions of the pond emphasize the great variety of its colors and forms. For instance he gives elaborate detail about the different kinds of ice that form in different times of the winter. He is particularly interested in the way that viewing the pond from different angles causes its appearance to change. And sometimes, he claims, he didn't have to change his perspective to perceive the pond's different colors: "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both" (223). The inherent duality of the water, its liminal position between earth and sky, gives the pond a fascinating and beautiful complexity. It's as if the water itself orchestrates a complex, wild harmony from the various elements and seasons it joins together.

Our discussion of Thoreau's descriptions of Walden Pond led my students to make connections between Thoreau's view of water and various Chinese understandings of water. For instance, Daoism often compares the Dao or the Way to water in that water appears soft, and yet it is very powerful. As Lao Tzu writes:

What is of all things most yielding [water]

Can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard [rock]. (197)

In addition, water mirrors the actions of others back to them; if they strike it, water can be very hard, but if they approach it more gently, water is gentle and a source of life. Water is powerful, but its power is adaptable and malleable. So although the

Chinese think of themselves as a harmonious and cooperative culture, their collective movement can be like that of a relentless flood: if you're going along for the ride, it's exciting, but if you want to change its course or get out of the current, you'll be overwhelmed. This is why most Chinese choose to go along with the flow rather than lying athwart it like Hai Zi and getting run over. The irony is that Thoreau celebrated the pond's water because it offered him new perspectives, while the Chinese value water for other reasons. For my Chinese students, water symbolizes the strength that comes from working together and getting along, but for Thoreau, it symbolizes the inherent complexity of wildness.

And yet Thoreau's view of water as revealing inherent dualities or paradoxes seemed to me to also apply to Chinese culture, which is certainly multifaceted and complex. It is both industrialized and traditional: it's not an uncommon sight to see a sleek Audi share the city roadway with an old man pulling a handcart full of produce. It is increasingly urban, but still largely rural (and there are few suburbs; it's a country of extremes). It is controlled by a centralized government, but life here often seems anarchic. For instance, while there are video cameras throughout the city taking pictures of every car that passes on the road and of every interaction on buses, no one obeys traffic laws; it's every man for himself on the streets. Even the various forms of water in China have opposite effects: when we traveled to Huangshan, the dense, wet fog obscured our vision, but in Wuhan City, whenever we had a dry spell the air became opaque with smelly smog, and we longed for a rain storm to clear the air. China's harmonious, unified self-image belies the rich complexity that thrives in this country, and the longer we stayed in China, the more hopeless I felt that I would begin to understand the paradoxes of this culture and land.

At the end of *Walden*, Thoreau has an experience which changes his earlier complete dismissal of the railroad and human industry. One spring day, as he walks to town along the railroad tracks, he notices the intricate, beautiful sand designs made by the sun's heat as it thaws the frozen water in the bank of the railroad cut. As the water thaws, it flows down the bank, carrying grains of sand along with it and forming elaborate patterns of sand "foliage." Thoreau's imagination now sees these leaf-like forms structuring everything: plants, water courses, the shape of the human body, even language. Thus he concludes that the "Maker of this earth but patented a leaf," and he sees in these designs the creative power that continues to form inanimate matter into life itself: "When I see on the one side the inert bank—for the sun acts on one side first—and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me—had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe" (356, 354). This sensation that he is watching the Creator's ongoing work gives him new hope that even human industry can be woven into the

wild life of the earth. “There is nothing inorganic,” he proclaims. Not only the earth, “but the institutions upon it are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter” (357). Seeing this ur-form transforming even the railroad bank into living foliage gives Thoreau confidence that Nature can incorporate human culture and industry into its wild life, and thus Thoreau finally can accept the place of the railroad in his culture. In fact, it seems to be this imaginative vision that enables Thoreau to leave Walden Pond and move back to Concord.

I’m never quite sure how to read this conclusion. Is Thoreau right to realize that human culture is part of nature also, or is he naive in thinking that human development can’t ultimately destroy natural life? Is he right that our imagination is what most needs to change? Every time I read *Walden* again I find myself vacillating on this point, at times admiring the vigor of Thoreau’s imaginative vision that enables him to see everything as part of nature’s wild life, and at other times thinking that this conclusion is naive and hopelessly dates Thoreau, that he could never write this conclusion after Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima, after massive projects like the Three Gorges Dam, after the mind-boggling quantities of fossil fuels we’ve burned. How can these destructive acts be healed and incorporated into nature’s ongoing life? Yet after teaching Thoreau in Wuhan, to people living in one of the most rapidly industrializing civilizations in the history of the world, I gained new hope that Thoreau’s conclusion, with its focus on imaginative and perceptual change, is right.

There are two reasons for my tentative hope that China will find a way to build a more sustainable economy, that in spite of the deep damage industry has done to the Chinese ecosystem and in spite of the demands of their vast population, China has as good a chance as any country to develop more healthy, truly harmonious ways of living. The first reason lies in Thoreau’s renewed imagination at the end of *Walden*. Perhaps Thoreau came to Walden not because Concord was hopelessly corrupt, but because he needed to clear his vision and see how to lead a healthy life there. This is what the pastoral genre has always been about: going to the country in order to gain a new perspective on city life, on human culture. The railroad itself was not the problem so much as Thoreau’s perception of it. As he writes, technology and civilization can be used for good ends, it’s just that so often our sight is damaged and we use them for selfish, destructive ends. So if technology is misused because of our wrong desires, gaining a new perception from naturally-renewed imaginations may enable us to use technology and industry in more healthy ways.

The greatest threat to China’s environment, then, may not be industry or development as such, but the attitude of the young people here that they need more wealthy and lavish lifestyles, that they need better jobs in better places. Of course, this problem is not unique to China; it’s certainly a deep threat to the health of America’s land and communities also. But in China, so many young people are still relatively close to abject poverty, and this intimate knowledge of the pain of hunger and want motivates them to put a wide buffer between themselves and poverty. One

of my students expressed what appears to be the general consensus: China needs to develop more rapidly and then apply their technological advances to fixing whatever environmental problems they have. I replied that I thought such technological boosterism was rather naive, but of course this attitude remains rampant in the West also, and I worry that this fixed faith—that more industry can fix the problems industry causes—remains the greatest threat to America’s ecological health also. As E. F. Schumacher explains in his classic *Small is Beautiful*, “The disease having been caused by allowing cleverness [or technology] to displace wisdom, no amount of clever research is likely to produce a cure” (39). Schumacher, like Thoreau, concludes that change must begin “inside” ourselves, as we reorient our cultural aspirations from more wealth and more luxury to pursue instead “health, beauty, and permanence” (119).

And indeed there seems to be a growing movement among some Americans who realize that material wealth doesn’t ultimately satisfy and who thus pursue more simple, responsible ways of living. While still a small minority, this movement, inspired by people like Thoreau and Wendell Berry and documented by authors like Paul Hawken and Rod Dreher, suggests that a cultural shift may be underway that would provide us with more healthy visions of a good life. I only spent three weeks in China, and to be honest I didn’t see much evidence of such a movement there; the focus remains on economic development. Nevertheless, the increasingly lively interchange of cultures and ideas that is happening in China fosters the intellectual climate where such perceptual change is possible, where young people can reconsider their needs and wants and can work toward healthy lives rather than lavish lives. And literature might play a role in renewing our imaginations, in helping all of us desire lives of contentment and wild harmony. As Hai Zi writes, “I hope that in this dusty world you become content / I only hope to face the ocean, as spring warms and flowers open.”

The second reason for my tentative hope is that, having no wilderness, China is under no illusion about their lack of ecological buffer and their need to live within natural limits. Because of their long cultural history here, there is no place in China that appears untouched by human history. There is no “wilderness.” There really isn’t wilderness in America either, in the sense that humans have roamed across and affected almost every square inch of the continent, but it’s a lot easier to imagine wilderness in America than in China. And yet this might not be a good thing for America. Perhaps, our belief that we have wild areas set aside assuages our conscience as we exploit other areas. As long as we Americans have a tonic of wildness to clean our air and water and minds, we think we can use the rest of our land however we want. The Chinese know they have no wilderness, no margin, and having a limited area of arable land, they tend to use it more carefully and conservingly. For instance, everyone in China agrees that it would be a disaster if every Chinese person owned a car; but in America, owning a car is viewed almost as a

constitutional right. Thus, the Communist government now makes reducing pollution and rebuilding ecological health a top priority, and they are planting trees and researching ways to make cleaner energy and curb emissions.

I certainly can understand the desperation that would lead a Hai Zi to lay down on the railroad tracks. In China, it feels as if there is no space to step out of the way of the mad rush of industry—you must either ride the railroad or be ridden over, and there appears to be no third option. And yet even Thoreau, in the very first paragraph of *Walden*, informs us that he is once again a “sojourner in civilized life” (45). My hope at the end of our brief visit in China is that there are enough sojourners in Chinese civilization and industry who recognize the need to work within a more natural economy, to develop with nature rather than try to run roughshod over the land and water and air. China’s dense smog, its increasingly toxic water, and their recent history of unwise central planning—most egregiously the Great Leap Forward—may serve as cautionary reminders to these sojourners that we live in a wild world that no amount of concrete and steel can fully tame. So although humans in all cultures are tempted to conform the world to their desires via technology rather than to conform their desires to the world via discipline and virtue, the Chinese culture is as well situated as any to cultivate those disciplines that make for more healthy lives.¹ This is the challenging wisdom that Thoreau offers, and this is why literature, by changing our imaginations and desires, may carry us closer to a sustainable economy than any train.

1 In reaching this conclusion, I have in mind not only Thoreau and Hai Zi, but also C. S. Lewis. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis puts it this way: “There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique” (77).

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