

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

If you are interested in learning more about ecological civilization, this is a conversation you won't want to miss.

Today, we are pleased to share a conversation with Michael A. Peters for the Earth Charter podcast. We will be discussing the newly published book called Handbook of Ecological Civilization by Springer. Michael, thank you so much for joining us today. Pleasure to be with you and thank you for all your help because I've got to say to begin with here, I want to begin with an acknowledgement because Earth Charter did a great job in making sure that there was a Western voice in this two volumes. I put it down to you and a variety of other people who contributed.

So thank you. So let me introduce to our audience who is Dr. Michael A. Peters. He's the leading editor of the Handbook of Ecological Civilization. He's a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand, currently a distinguished professor at Tsinghua University in China. And before that was part of the Beijing No More University and among many other things. He has been editor of journals and published books in various themes and views. So let's start by talking about the Handbook of Ecological Civilization, which is the reason why we are here together today.

Michael, could you share with us what are the key ideas we can find in this book, especially when it comes to the concept, philosophy and pedagogy? We would like to hear some of the highlights you may want to bring us. Well, it's a very important concept to grasp at this particular point in the world when we have oil wars going on in the Middle East and a complete damage and genocide of populations. A genocide of not only populations of people, of young people, of children, but also of huge damage to the environment.

And this is a consequence of a civilization which is oil and industrial based, not an ecological society. And on ecological civilization, which is desperately required, we need to transition from one to the other. In fact, one might say the survival of humanity depends on that peaceful transition from oil and gas, you know, it's going to go to peak about 2030. And thereafter we're on the decline with a fixed resource. It's done huge damage and the extraction of it has done huge damage. Now we have to invent a way where creatively we can move to an ecological future.

How you merged and how you brought together the other editors and the other contributors of various chapters. Well, you know, I have always been sensitive to sustainable development. I was trained as a geographer, a critical geographer, a Marxist geographer really. We were very critical of the way in which the extraction of resources took place. Everywhere. Of course, in New Zealand, the mining lobby and what that means for a future economy. So, you know, I mean, I was sensitized to these issues.

And of course, I did physical geography as well. Although I'm not a very good geomorphologist or geologist, more critical. But I must say in China, I found an emphasis on the question of environmental harmony, harmony with the environment. It's a deep Chinese ethics. I think harmony with the environment is a really important element of ecological civilization, but also a Chinese concept of beauty and aesthetics. And aesthetics are what a city should look like in the future and so on. So, and I also discovered being a follower of President Xi and legislation, I see that the concept was introduced into Chinese debates about 2013.

It had many, many evil and ancient references in Chinese ethics. And it came to fruition at Pan Huia, who is in the book there, one of the architects of this notion and a policy and philosophical level. You know, what we found while it came into discourse about 2013, by 2018, it was in Sconston Chinese law. They started legislating for it. So, it was a real. It's not just a philosophy. It's a series of policies as well. I thought that the West really needed to hear from Chinese writers, but also from aware Westerners, you know, what this concept means in practice and how we might be able to support it in our own way.

So, you are seeing that the government of China really took the concept very seriously and infused it in the Chinese constitution. Is that right?

Absolutely. Correct.

Yeah, that's correct. You were already working in China and you know a lot of Chinese scholars. And for this book, you just built really collaboration with the other editors of this book in various Chinese contributors. Yeah, once I decided that I should investigate this concept further, I turned to some immediate friends, Ben Green, who's a young student scholar. He's now, I think, an assistant professor at one of the Beijing institutions. And then Greg Maseask, he's a Polish extraction US guy, really interested in ecopedagogy.

And then let me say Zhu Long Yu, who is the Dean of the faculty at Beijing Normal University. So, those are three colleagues I had. But I also had a friend of mine, Wang Jihui. He's been a friend of mine for like 20, 25 years. We haven't seen a lot of each other, but we've been very friendly towards one another and shared things. And Wang Jihui, who comes from the process centre on Santa Fe and process philosophy, understands the work behind Earth Charter, of course, I think, and does active work with Earth Charter.

So, you know, there are a lot of people out there that could help me. And then I had to go and tap into the university departments and these scientists, Chinese scientists and ecologists and philosophers and policymakers who were already doing the work of ecological civilization in China had been doing it for, you know, maybe 20 years. So, how many chapters can we find in this book? And if you would mind sharing some highlights of some of the ideas that come to your mind from some of these chapters?

Yeah, sure. There are, I think, at last count, 79 chapters. And, you know, we have basically, you know, we have three concepts, you know, the philosophy, the concept and pedagogy. So we're really, we're in that kind of progression from, people would say from theory to practice, you know, because they want a practical action oriented element to it. I do know,

I mean, I've been privileged to meet a lot of young Chinese scholars who are very interested in ecological civilization and they're interested also, as you know, in AI.

And the institution that I met at Tsinghua is probably the best, the top university for AI in China. But it has a recently a School of Education there, which embraces different paradigms, you know, and one paradigm, of course, is a form of AI, which is, let me say, green, green AI, a form of AI that can support sustainability, sustainable development. And how do we devise, how do we design the question becomes an engineering question? And I know, you know, one of your friends born, I fear, Haydal, he's talking about, you know, engineering desert environments, you know, so these are ecological philosophies that enable AI to do that monitoring work.

So I just want to make a plug there for Tsinghua, because it's the institution that employed me. And secondly, it's one that we might turn to for more guidance and how AI and sustainability can be brought together into a very fruitful engagement. And how do you see ecological civilization as a response to the current planetary crisis we are facing?

Well, you know, I'm kind of like, I suppose, technically, they would call me a post-Marxist. I'm very influenced by Marx. I'm also influenced by Freire, by Wittgenstein, by Michel Foucault.

And I would say, but at the same time, I try to resist dialectical logic, because I don't want to frame up the current crisis as a crisis of opposition between the US and China.

I think we should avoid a kind of interpretation that gives us only an either-or. So I don't want to say it's an either-or, but let me say that there is one expression of it at the moment, which is represents the embrace of ecological civilization and the willing targeting of gases, of atmospheric gases, limiting carbon-based forms. And one organization, one civilization that really is dedicated to that response as a path, what the Chinese would call a path to modernity. And one, of course, that is based on bolstering the old oil gas lobby, you know.

And fundamental to both civilizations here is, of course, how they marry, or whether they marry, AI as the current demand for energy, excessive amounts of energy, for a future path, which inevitably for American capitalism, this means nuclear energy and forms of nuclear power plants. So what we're going to see, I think probably both in China and also in the US, is a new kind of civilization, but it will be based on demands for energy that can't be met easily through, I think, probably, there will be plants that use existing renewable energies.

There will be those that are also based on oil and gas. But when we say the future is coming in the next 25 years, it's a society based on the AI infrastructure, which demands huge amounts of energy. There are principles here that we must consult in relation to ecological civilization. That's probably one scenario from a realistic point of view. I don't know what you would say, Viola, about oil politics and sustainable development, but it is a suppressing matter, right?

Yeah, sure it is. I also understand that in the book we can see voices highlighting that ecological civilization moves beyond the Western dualism of humanity versus nature.

It invites us to embrace a more vision of interdependence, which can be drawn from the Chinese traditions of unity of heaven, earth and humanity, but also is linked to their shatter. Can you make a comment on that in terms of how the concept of ecological civilization helps us to expand our worldviews in that regard?

I think basically, to put it in one word, it's a spiritual vision of interconnectedness between humanity and the environment. They don't accept. They say the concept here, the Dao concept, and we might even say Confucian concept here is non-duality.

Whereas we know from our philosophical studies, since Descartes in the West, we have been trying to find ways to move beyond dualistic logics. So at one level, this is a kind of non-exclusiveness and a fully relational spirituality and a core for ecological civilization, which is probably best represented by, and I know this is people say this is a cheap way out of indigenous people. And I would say indigenous people today, but also indigenous people in the past, the spiritual environment with the environment is something we can learn from.

So I think in brief, I think I've gone from the logic to the spirit. I think both elements fundamentally similar kinds of things for ecological civilization. Michael, you often bring Chinese and Western philosophies into dialogue. How do you see this cross-cultural perspective in reaching the concept of ecological civilization and maybe even reshaping how we teach sustainability?

Yeah, that's a really complex question. I've got to say, trying to answer a cross-cultural element. I'm influenced by the psychologist Yong.

He was talking about his friend, Maester, who had just recently, who's on his deathbed, and Maester had just finished translating the I Ching, the Yi Ching, the book, the religious book going back. He was a Jesuit who had gone to China to convert Chinese to Christianity. And he was lying on his deathbed and he said to Yong, he said, I went there to convert them and I came back, you know, a Chinese, I had a Chinese sort of soul. I came back with a Chinese soul. So I mean, I think I'm really hesitant to talk about Chinese philosophy because I wasn't schooled and I wasn't brought up in it.

And so my understanding is at a very superficial level. But I do respect it and I do realize that intergenerational and intercultural philosophy is very difficult because you have to have people who are deeply skilled in both traditions and that's quite hard to find. But I do think here the concept of ecological civilization grows out of a study of ancient Chinese, the roots of ancient Chinese philosophy. And the policymakers and the people in the Politburo, the communists in the CCP, believed that they needed to do something about the consequences of oil industrial society.

It was killing Chinese society. It was killing the Chinese environment. You can scale up in the industrial experiment up to a point where it has very damaging consequences. And then we've seen the restoration projects of the Yangtze River, another river, which are

huge and then of the Tibetan Plateau, the ecological systems that have put in place based on the realization that if we are going to survive as a species, we can't just establish a post on the moon in the next 25 years or colonize the moon.

We have to deal with consequences here of an industrial system that is exploitative of minerals and of the environment generally. And of people as a whole. We have to move to something that has a kind of a much more spiritual vision. It must give them hope, some hope. And also based on the realization that from the grassroots up, the actions that you take in your own community is a contribution to this change of mind. That the change of mind can be activated, can be acted upon, enacted within local communities.

Now, it has been for quite a long time. People, for instance, who have come in small communities. I live in a community of roughly 1,500 people. But here in this community, there are 32 clubs. And lots of gardens, communal gardens and communal ways of doing things, protection of overfishing in the community and so on. So, you know, I think, let me say, there were a lot of people along the way that helped to sensitize me to the Chinese concept of ecological civilization. And, you know, I really say one of them is a Westerner that Wang Jihua introduced me to.

And that's the work of Dr. John Cobb, who is a Methodist theologian who has a very strong interest in ecological civilization. And what is one of the early people to articulate a kind of spiritual vision for it? So, the concept of ecological civilization that John Cobb articulated, how he outlined, how he envisioned ecological civilization, is it very similar to what we see in the, how the concept of ecological civilization is worked or articulated, perceived in China? Or are they different?

Yeah, I think it is. And, you know, there are actual material connections.

I mean, Wang Jihua, who's crossed over, if I keep mentioning his name, to process philosophy, he understood John Cobb's philosophy of interconnectedness, not just at a spiritual level, but really at an epistemological level. You know, that when you analyze an environment that has humanity as part of it, as part of it, like a lot of philosophers, they have to embrace a different kind of understanding of that environment. And, you know, one way of looking at it is a kind of fundamental shift from Newtonian physics to quantum physics.

This is one that really, it does away with the privileged spectator of humanity who views the environment, but understands, you know, I mean, you remember that lovely, that lovely popular book going back to the 1970s, called *The Dancing Wulu Masters*? I mean, you know, it was kind of like 70s book, and it was the age also of people like Bateson, steps towards an ecology of mind. You know, we had, in the West also, we had people who understood the epistemology of the environment, the interconnectedness, the links, how, let's say also, the human brain is, has some sort of pattern recognition to larger physical realities, and it's part of larger physical reality.

So, you know, there's a kind of pretty deep, there's pretty deep sort of shift of consciousness going on there. I'd like to say that there's no inevitability about this, but the rise of ecological consciousness is something that has taken on a very recent, is a very recent

phenomenon, a very hopeful phenomenon, saving the, let me say, saving the earth from itself, from the people in us, from some of the people in us.

I believe that one of the major challenges we have is actually to move away from this fragmented mindset of separation between humans and nature into one that we can see, not only see, understand, but also perceive and really deeply feel that we are all part of, well, as Gerard Chávez said, the community of life, nature in humans we are part of, not separated from, but it's too a challenge to, because often in conversations we have people saying, well, but first we need to solve the problems of food and poverty, and looking at the environment and nature is a luxury and etc.

So often there is this kind of conversation of what comes first, but I think that question comes from, because of a specific mindset of separation. Now, let's talk about, can I just say, I agree with what you're saying here. All right, I think that's a very important comment. I think the food and poverty is a better understanding of the food problem and the poverty problem is given by understanding from an ecological point of view. If you don't understand those problems from an ecological point of view, then you are not understanding the problem.

So I'm just agreeing with you. Yeah, sure, sure. So in the handbook of ecological civilization, education is seen as a key to systemic change. What kind of educational transformation do you think is needed to move from awareness to real ecological responsibility in action?

Well, you know, there are multiple ways of doing this. First of all, I don't think there's one true gospel on how we transfer theory, you know, from a theoretical dimension to a practical dimension, especially with different ages of children.

But I mean, you know, let me say, you know, from very early age, those curricula from the early age that respect the environment, teach people, kids, that you can't use the environment as a waste basket. OK, so you can't just throw things down. You know, and so that response, that ethic, you're talking about ethic of responsibility. And, you know, to talk about a pedagogy that's based on an ethics of responsibility, you know, when you're talking about very young people, by children, of course, you can do this.

You can teach them. And you know, you have to teach them through a kind of, I would say, action ethics. It's an ethics, it's a praxis of early childhood education, you know. It's a praxis. And, you know, it's also based on understanding. So it's not just, it doesn't just become a behavior, but it has to have that self-reflective element. They have to know why they are doing this and why they're changing their behavior. So particularly, I think, you know, in some cities where there's massive poverty that we've never seen, the understanding of the fact that personal hygiene and collective hygiene, questions of health are dependent on, you know, notions of sanitation.

And those notions of sanitation need to be systems that respect the environment, you know. And I mean, I'm saying, you know, from the ground up, it's kind of like, it also involves that critical element. So I'm talking about pedagogy of ethical responsibility. It

does have that, you must be able to confront your own existing habits and also... Our own existing habits through a pedagogy of critical responsibility?

Ah, true.

True. So let's say, for instance, as Westerners who are obese, technically obese, and they are encouraged to reap products that has cane sugar in everything, you know. This is an environmental question, a question of health here. And you know, it's not just... It should not be just a matter of taking a pill that can enable you to lose weight and take... You have to take ethical responsibility for yourself and also for the environment. So you see those two questions are very much related. And I think, you know, the question here, you can teach this from the very, very early ages right through.

And it becomes more technical as we go through. But I think it's based also on what you and I, I think, agree on, which is a kind of epistemology of connectedness. And that epistemology of connectedness is one representation of the planetary. And when we're talking about the very recent rise in ecological consciousness, we know that that rise of consciousness comes from an understanding of ecological practice. You know, the farmers know, unless they put some animal manure back into the soil, the crop is going to die out eventually.

These are intergenerational practices. Some are OK, are good, are survival oriented. I'm very influenced by Māori, Māori, not models here in New Zealand, in our *teorora*. They've been around for a couple of thousand years, I guess, and maybe even earlier in other groups of islands, they brought their practices with them. I mean, that's a small scale. But let's say there are things that we have to confront about our own cultures, particularly as Western consumers. The critique of capitalist consumerism, more of this, more and more and growth, and the unlimited, and the limits of growth.

And I think also the fact that we really do need to teach a critique of consumer capitalism, how our identities are very much tied up from a very early age with a kind of capitalism, which is based on exploitation. So let me just say that as a post-Marxist, as somebody who believes that there is a room for Marx to say something here about environmental questions, particularly when it comes to questions about political economy. I keep thinking that one of the key roles for education for the current times is to help us see and amplify our capacity to see the interconnections.

Now, from your work on this book and what you know about China through your years of experience working there, what is your take on the role of ecological civilization, the concept and the current decisions to make it happen, in shaping educational policies and practices, particularly in China? I mean, given that we understand that the central government of China made a decision to make ecological civilization a priority and to incorporate that as part of the Constitution, but the question is, is it being reflected in policies and practice within the education context of what you can see in China?

Well, I think, you know, first of all, classical Chinese culture now has an ecological edge to it, I think. Very much an ecological edge to it, because it is a very popular discourse. And it's one where the notion of ecological reclamation of areas, that we're once, you

know, like the Yangtze River was one of the civilizational beginnings for humanity as a whole, along with the Nile and various other, you know, the Indus, the Ganges and so on. And I think that what one sees here now is an ability at the level of policy and practice to recognize the concept of environmental system.

Let me cut to the chase here, because I'm going to say from an epistole point of view, every time I go back to China and I see here the number of trees that have been grown in the urban area, it bowls me over, even as in New Zealand, right? The emphasis on beautifying the environment and by selecting indigenous species and replanting and reforestation. And you know, this is something that, you know, it's like, it's a village approach. It's a village pedagogy approach, but let's say also urban pedagogies, which are designed to plant trees, which are basically the way of reclaiming.

It's a restoration, a planetary restoration and reclamation of environment. And I think that is pretty well ensconced in the curriculum. And I think at the advanced levels, we have more, I was amazed when I was doing some research for this, how many departments of ecological science there are, and you know, 3000 universities in China and how they are dedicated to working through the Academy of Sciences and also the Academy of Ecological Sciences to develop projects that have, you know, the Chinese are so pragmatic and so outcome focused.

You know, when they set a target, as they do in the five year planning cycle, you know, they are, they, they, you talk about ethical responsibility. I think you can talk about response, their ability to respond at scale and on target is kind of like, you know, remarkable to me. It's very interesting to hear. Now, many years ago, you wrote a book on moral education and the ethics of self cultivation, Chinese and Western perspectives. So of course, that is off my personal interest. So I would like to ask you if you could share with us what are the main ideas we can find in this book and maybe how do you think moral education should be understood in the current times and also maybe even in this, the framework of ecological civilization?

Well, the, the ethics of self cultivation, if I had to boil down everything that I learned about Chinese education, since I've been there, 20, 25 years or something like that. Then on an official basis, like the last 10 years at Beijing Normal University and then the, you know, the two years at Xing, Xinghua and, and, and traveled many universities in China. I must say, what I would say the underlying kind of motto is ethics of self cultivation. Education concerns the ethics of self cultivation.

How do you teach somebody to become responsible for themselves, for others and for the environment? So that's kind of like, that's the basic, I think, the basic Chinese credo, although, and I'm prepared to defend that in other ways, but you know, I'm not a specialist in Chinese philosophy. I wish I was, but I only have one lifetime and it takes more than a lifetime to come to grips with Confucianism or Taoism or even some of the more, you know, even Marxist and comparative frameworks, you know, because there are many, there are many different kinds of philosophies operating here and the whole group of philosophers in Chinese universities that I think when I talk to my posts, my PhD groups, I say the future of philosophy is Chinese and it's woman because there are more women taking humanity courses.

All the men take the engineering courses. So I say, look, you have you women philosophers coming through, you have even more of a responsibility because you have to take up the action on the part of your sometimes your husbands who have gone into banking or engineering. So I think in that book, it was a truly Chinese, Western approach. You know, and I'm very interested in hearing from people who want to, you know, want to go down that track because I think it's a very useful track when we begin to examine ourselves in our own ethics.

And when I say ethics of self-cultivation is a pedagogical line that goes back and has ancient origins in China. I'm thinking that we can talk about the ethics of self-cultivation in relation to ecology as well. And I think we should build that link and build that understanding. And we didn't we didn't broach that question in that book because we were in that book, we were mostly concerned with looking at different traditions and comparing the different traditions with Western and Chinese on the ethics of self-cultivation.

And we might say instead of cultivation, because the Chinese want to talk about the self in relation to gardens, you know, then the grow and growing things that self is like something that you can grow and you can change and you can you can cultivate it. You can cultivate it. And that's what education's role is. And, you know, when you talk about teachers and leaders and people, you have to you have to have an awareness of the organics of self of self, you know, self is even in the West. The self is like a plant, you know, you plant it in the right environment, in the right soil. And, you know, this is a biblical narrative.

And, you know, we can go we can see the links between biblical narratives and Chinese philosophy. And I think so that was really concerned with understanding how the two different traditions of ethics in education can really begin to fuse and to say something to one another. So I could go on at great length, but I think probably I've said enough to, you know, to encourage people to look at that more seriously. It is a very interesting topic and book. And I'm happy to hear you say that from your experience, you have seen that throughout the places you have seen in China in terms of making the ethics of self cultivation central cross cutting, maybe through different disciplines across higher education in China.

Is that right?

Yep, definitely, definitely. Well, self cultivation is a let me say self cultivation is an ecological narrative. Understand the power of the narrative. And it has religious and an ancient ethical basis to it in both Western and Chinese traditions. So I think that's a that's a very fertile area for action and for theory.

Well, OK, Michael, thank you so much. We're coming to an end.

But before we close our conversation today, I'd like to ask you where you are where would you wish to envision this work moving forward in terms of now we have this outstanding publication with the Handbook of ecological civilization, but where how would you like to envision this moving forward in the future in first enhancing understanding on the

concept of ecological civilization across generations and in different places in the world, but also in making it happen through education and in decision making?

Well, I mean, it is a handbook. So the title of it is a handbook and it doesn't provide one coherent policy narrative or let me say it involves a diversity of viewpoint. All of them positive, but some Chinese, some Western, some from Earth Charter, some from other traditions, religious traditions, some that are highly Christian, others that are more scientific.

So there are many different threads that people can pick up on. They can identify a voice. They can develop a practice. They can begin to understand also, I think the broader relationship between philosophy on the one hand and ecology and in practice in pedagogy. You know, so that's the progression. That's the progression. I hope people can be creative enough to develop, you know, particularly teachers who are influenced by this book, who come, who come, you know, go into the classroom looking for a framework where they can see a basis for a plan, a lesson plan.

You can see a movement from philosophy, ecology, particularly the rise of the ecological consciousness, ecological civilization and in pedagogy. And how, you know, that is a really a strong set forward of people can do that. I'm hoping I'm teachers. Well, I used to be a teacher for seven years, right? And they're excited by ideas and they're excited by children. They are a very hopeful group of people. So, you know, I just hope it does help some people along the way as a handbook. I could say foot book, but, you know, they're not actually doing your garden at the stage.

But it's traditionally called a handbook. So, you know, I think they should find it interesting. Wonderful, wonderful. Well, Michael, thank you so much for joining us today for the Earth Charter podcast and hope to continue to collaborate with you in the near future. Thank you. Thank you very much for the questions.

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