American export: The Chinese embrace process thought

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After giving the keynote address at a recent conference on “ecological civilization” attended by more than 60 scholars and government officials from China, theologian John Cobb joined conferees in a group photo. Then, in a spontaneous break in the schedule, Chinese participants took turns standing or sitting near Cobb while associates and friends snapped their pictures.

The soft-spoken Cobb, 85, a longtime advocate for liberal Christian causes and a preeminent thinker in process theology, remarked that he never had this kind of popularity with U.S. audiences. Some leading figures in China, however, see in process thought a philosophical framework for dealing with that nation’s burgeoning economic growth and the problems of modernization.

The father of process philosophy, the British mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), said that everything that exists is inter related and that people are personally and communally responsible for the common good.

Cobb, a United Methodist, was born of missionary parents in Kobe, Japan. He earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago and taught at Emory University before joining the Claremont School of Theology in Cali fornia in 1958. Officially retired for two decades, he still lectures at the Center for Process Studies on the seminary campus.

In China, process thought—often called constructive postmodernism there—has generated major interest since 2002, when a conference in Beijing sponsored by the Claremont center drew national press coverage in China. Clare mont officials say that interest persists.

Nineteen Chinese universities have process centers with ties to the Clare mont center. An estimated 35 million elementary and pre–high school students in 1,642 Chinese counties and cities are being educated in a new curriculum based on

process thought—an experiment to see if they perform better academically and more creatively than under traditional courses that emphasize memorization.

About 5,000 Chinese officials and intellectuals subscribe to the center's bimonthly newspaper, *Culture Commun ication*, and the Communist Party sends government workers and scholars to process studies conferences and classes in the U.S. and China.

"The response we are getting in China has utterly astonished me," Cobb said. Several years ago, he said, "the no. 2 man in China's Department of Religious Affairs spent four months with us."

Chinese attendance at the U.S. conferences is limited by the number of visas granted. For instance, 155 applied to come to the May conference at Claremont, but only 62 were admitted into the country, according to Cobb.

A top-ranked religious figure in China, former Anglican bishop K. H. Ting, who will turn 95 in September, has identified himself in print as a "process theologian." Ting is president emeritus of the China Christian Council, which governs the officially approved Protestant church, and has served in political and legislative posts.

Process theology occupies a modest niche in U.S. theological circles. It addresses the classic problem of evil—how can an omnipotent God allow bad things to happen?—by positing that God is not all-powerful and not a micromanager of earthly events. Process theologians would say that God rejoices and suffers with humans in their ups and downs and is concerned with all levels of existence.

Cobb said that the Chinese do not object to the word *God*, but "the idea that there is some center of control that determines everything has never been a part of Chinese thought." From his point of view, Cobb said, "the problem of evil grows out of the terrible doctrine of divine omnipotence, which is not biblical but which became so deeply established that many Christians think you can't worship without believing it."

Many of the Chinese who come to Claremont know that the Center for Process Studies is part of a seminary. Some center events are held in the chapel. "What has amazed me," said Cobb, "is that Chinese Marxists are far less troubled by the church connection than are many American academics."

Once, in speaking to a Chinese audience, Cobb recalled, “I emphasized the common roots of Marxism and Chris tianity in the Hebrew prophets. Of course, I went on to speak as a Christian who is not a Marxist.”

Even many Chinese downplay their Marxism. “Although China is officially Marxist, this has become something like saying that many European countries are officially Christian,” Cobb said. “Most Chinese scholars, intellectuals and government officials look elsewhere for guidance in practical and even theoretical matters.” Still, it’s important for Chinese leaders to claim a Marxist basis for their policies, he added.

Cobb said he is acting as a Christian when he tries to encourage China to develop in a more ecological way. That practical emphasis is analogous, he suggested, to contemporary Christian missions that focus on education, medicine and agriculture.

“We are not under the illusion that we can make much difference all by ourselves,” Cobb said.

Indeed, news stories out of China depict a mammoth economic transformation under way, with frenzied rushes to buy property in cities and to seize upon entrepreneurial opportunities. The Michi gan-based Amway direct-sales company of health supplements and personal products has been booming in China and is rewarding some 13,000 of its top salespeople with all-expenses-paid trips to Southern California over the summer months.

Key to popularizing process thought in China, said Cobb, are Zhihe Wang and Meijun Fan, a married couple who shuttle frequently between Claremont and China. Wang studied West ern philosophy at Beijing University and earned a Ph.D. in philosophy of religion at Claremont Graduate University. Fan completed doctoral studies at Beijing Normal University.

Wang, in a talk at the Claremont forum in May, said China seeks a philosophical “third way”—one that is neither traditional Chinese philosophy nor an imitation of Western industrial solutions. Constructive postmodernism, he said, is a worldview that “can be rational as well as spiritually meaningful.” Wang cited the chair of Nankai University’s philosophy department, who said that the emphasis in constructive postmodernism on fluid relationships has “something in common with the Taoist understanding of nature and the cosmos.”

Philip Clayton, who teaches at both the seminary and Claremont Graduate University, declared that modernist ideas have usurped the inherited philosophies and religions of East and West; however, those traditions “are not museum ex hibits” but rather “indispensable pieces of the solution” if interpreted in the light of ecological crises.

Because of Whitehead’s insights, “we now know that the entire biosphere consists of organic relationships and constitutes a single interconnected web,” Clayton said. “Thus, it is not surprising that religious fundamentalism, the dark child of modernity, would crusade against biological thinking in all its forms”—an allusion to the fact that many conservative Christians display a lack of interest in “green” solutions to energy needs and are skeptical about human-induced global warming.

Observed Cobb: “People are not likely to treat nature with the necessary respect if they do not deeply feel that they are a part of it.”

Cobb’s speech may have alternately pleased and irked Chinese officials. “In every society wealth threatens to corrupt, and China is not free from this danger,” he said. Cobb also asserted that China will be unable to establish an ecological civilization unless its population growth is stabilized.

Cobb also criticized China’s recent attempts to gain control over large tracts of land in Africa in an effort to supply more food for its people. However farsighted that effort might seem, he said, Africa not only lacks “genuinely surplus land” but also has much hunger, even starvation. “A truly ecological civilization will do as little damage as possible to weaker and poorer people in the process of supplying its own needs,” Cobb said.

Answers lie instead in developing more productive, intensive forms of agriculture in China and in keeping skillful peasants on the land and paying them well for their work, so they will not be forced to seek work in cities.

To address problems of pollution and urban crowding, Cobb drew upon the ideas of Arizona visionary Paolo Soleri, now 90, who proposes phasing out automobiles and turning to subways, trains and bicycles and the use of solar energy. Soleri thinks that many structures, such as bridges and dams, could have multiple uses, including housing. “He showed that what at first glance seems to be unpleasant crowding could in fact improve livability,” Cobb said.

Cobb called for a “market socialism” that allows the market to set prices but sees the well-being of all as its goal. “I believe that China is uniquely positioned to lead the world,” Cobb concluded.

“We still have a long way to go,” noted Zhihe Wang. “In ancient Chinese, the opposite of the word ‘poor’ is not ‘rich’ but ‘change.’”