Dipesh Chakrabarty concludes the first chapter of his thought-provoking book with a brief reference to what many Europeans and Americans probably regard as an obscure episode (that is, if they even know about it): the brief war between India and China fought in the Hindu Kush and Himalayan region in the autumn of 1962. As Chakrabarty recalls it, the Chinese side unilaterally withdrew from the conflict zones, thereby ending the war, and though friction has recently reignited, the dispute still remains largely frozen on the glacier-sculpted slopes of the world’s highest peaks. This act of what, following Bruno Latour, he calls a kind of “diplomacy,” could offer a template for implementing “a process of scaling back the realm of the human-modern.”¹ That is, it could prompt a retreat by the carbon-spewing “modernizing and global” segment of earth’s population, in the interest of preserving a survivable habitat for what Buddhists call sattva (Sanskrit; Ch. zhongsheng 慈生, literally “myriad lives”), the pluriverse of human and other sentient beings.

This theme reverberates through much of the rest of the book, as Chakrabarty ruminates on the possibilities for bringing the ethno-, socio-, cultural, and political multiplicity of the (human-constructed) “globe” into less destructive relationships both with one another and with the unitary Earth system, the “planet,” upon which humanity depends. His suggestion to “make kin” with those with whom one may not agree is certainly a sensible one. And his figurative allusion to parallax, whereby the visual perception of objects varies between different vantage points and enables biological stereopsis as well as the mechanical measurement of distance, is apt. With a brief look at an exemplary attempt at intellectual parallax by the indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, the book comes to an uplifting endpoint, at which we are left with a glimmer of hope that the political and scientific, or the global and planetary, might preserve

¹Chakrabarty, 41
some vestiges of Enlightenment-inspired emancipatory, even utopian idealism in the “scaled-back” Anthropocene that awaits our descendants.2

In spite of this tantalizing nod to Chinese military restraint, Chakrabarty does not delve into how Chinese or other East Asian patterns of thought or action might contribute to the nurturing of a planetary-global parallax. To the contrary, he speaks of contemporary Chinese—accurately and perhaps justifiably—as the single largest contingent of the “pale copies” of European moderns whose participation in the Great Acceleration of resource consumption has brought the biosphere closer to the precipice of calamity. Nevertheless, Chakrabarty appears to raise the tantalizing possibility that the Chinese Weltanschauung that manifested itself in 1962 might stimulate thinking through and even breaking through the epistemological and political impasses that to date have stymied collective action to address the looming specter of climate chaos.

How might the “diplomatic” turn to which Chakrabarty alludes be reflected in that Weltanschauung? We can find an analog in what the Sinologist François Jullien (b. 1951) has called “discretion,” as well as a fluid, nimble attentiveness to temporal flux in classical Chinese thought, notions that have been taken up by John Cox (b. 1924) in process theology and philosophy and many recent eco-critics. Chinese thought, says Jullien, is “always anxious to capture the capacity invested in natural processes, [and] is wary of anything that seems to stand on its own and is visible. It does not declare there to be no subject or ignore it, let alone suggest that a subject should deny its own existence or condemn itself (for its aim is certainly to succeed). It is simply that the subject always remains smooth, fluid, and discreet…. Instead of ultimately exalting human willpower, the ideal that Chinese thought advocates is to slip into the world so discreetly that one no longer seems to make any intervention (nonaction [wuwei 無為]) and to melt into its processivity in order to succeed.”3

To both Laozi (the locus classicus of wuwei) and Sunzi (AKA The Art of War), success hinges on the “suppleness” (rou 柔) and “purity” (qing 清) of the human agents

---

2 Ibid., 104.
3 Jullien, On Efficacy, 175.
of nonaction. In contrast to Chinese articulations of such *sagesse*, European philosophy, Jullien argues, is colored by the millennia-long Western heroic quest for the Unknown (ἄγνωτος [*agnotos*]) that began with Odysseus’ “drifting” seaward in search of home. Calling this the font, even the “father” of philosophy, he characterizes both the voyage itself and its destination as wrapped in mystery, making the quest a metaphysical search for essences, one of the principal *topoi*, what he calls the “folds” (*plis*) of Western thought. Moreover, an obsession with the Unknown that propels the subject—the Hero—forward, evolved over two millennia into what he calls the “progressive buildup to its modern extreme, in the auto-consistency of the subject” through the exercise of individual will, and an obsession with both self-affirmation and self-agency. “European thought,” he says, “converged from all sides to set it [the will] up as an ability to confront the world and as the source of the subject’s power to affirm himself and fulfill himself.”

If indeed a Chinese or broadly East Asian-inflected ethics of nonintervention and discretion amid fluidity holds any lessons for the human pluriverse beyond its region of origin, it could be to help us to critically examine the conceptual habits that underlie the global yet simultaneously parochially configured civilization(s) we currently inhabit. Could a Chinese-inspired diplomatic discretion make a dent in the environmental violence inflicted by the consumption-intensive moderns who prevail in many if not all areas of the world today? Pondering such classical ideals might at least lead us toward a fruitful discussion of the habits that historically arose out of a modern obsession with self-affirmation that is simultaneously liberatory and environmentally ruinous. Exploring how receptivity and sensitivity to the unceasing flux of all life forms, and our entanglement with them, might facilitate the nurturing of sensibilities conducive to constructing less environmentally obtrusive and, ergo, less corrosive human societies in a scaled-down future. And how quickly we can reconstruct our relationships to both planet and globe will, as Chakrabarty poignantly concludes, decide what kind of future awaits us.

---

5 *On Efficacy*, 182.
Nonetheless, if indeed a noninterventionist, diplomatic sensibility does in fact hold the potential to shift the globe as a whole toward sustainability, some might ask why China has continued to rely heavily on high-growth, carbon-intensive development even as it implements significant policies of mitigation. One could argue that historical contingencies like geopolitical conflicts and the sway of Marxism and free market ideologies, respectively, have weakened the hold of such classical ideals over the past century. In fact, the career of the renowned philosopher Liang Shuming (1893-1988) offers a case study of how this transpired. During the early stage of industrialization in the 1910s-1930s, Liang expressed considerable unease over China’s modern transformation, whether along Euro-American capitalist lines or later based on the socialist model pioneered in the Soviet Union. To counter these, he advocated spiritual and moral renewal through reviving the indigenous values of selflessness, reciprocity, and frugality, and lauded the contemplative habits of the traditional literati.

Moreover, Liang was not content to remain an armchair theorist. From the mid 1920s to the late 1930s, he made several attempts to put his ideals into practice as a leader of the Rural Reconstruction (xiangcun jianshe) movement. His involvement in this endeavor began as a search for alternatives to what he regarded as the enslavement and impoverishment of the peasantry by emerging forms of capitalist exploitation that had disrupted the equilibrium between village and urban centers, culminating in a stint as the director of a reconstruction project in Zouping County, located in northwestern Shandong Province, in 1931–37. During Liang’s tenure there, the region made demonstrable progress in raising literacy rates and agricultural yields, lowering infant mortality and communicable diseases, and achieving yet other markers of material and social betterment. By 1936, more than half the prefectures in Shandong had adopted this model, and it was on the verge of province-wide implementation when the looming threat of Japanese invasion brought it to a halt. The Sino-Japanese War and the civil war that followed prevented him and other rural reformers like James Yen (Yan Yangchu, 1893–1990), from realizing the goals of their movement. With the adoption of Soviet-style planned development (ca 1950-1990), followed by the explosive

---

6 Li, 112.
urbanization and industrialization spurred by market-oriented reforms after 1990, the sway of traditional socioeconomic and philosophical values weakened ever further. Although a reorientation toward neo-traditional values has been underway in the Xi Jinping era (2012-present), it remains to be seen whether this will entail the fundamental rethinking of policies and lifestyles necessary to achieve the kind of scaling back that Chakrabarty has proposed. We can only hope that the global community will join in the effort to preserve a livable planet.

Works Cited


Li, Qingyu 李慶餘. 在出世與入世之間: 梁漱溟先生對佛學的理解與定位 [Between Disengagement and Engagement with the World: Mr Liang Shuming’s Understanding and Positioning of Buddhism]. Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 2013.