

China in climate driver's seat after Trump rejects Paris

June 27 2017, by James Miller

With President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Paris climate change accords, it's now clear to the world that [action on climate change will rest increasingly in the hands of China](#), not America or the European Union.

Given the global nature of the climate crisis, the decisions that China's leaders make over the next decade will have a profound impact around the world. Shockingly, as sea levels rise, [the fate of America's coastal cities](#), from Palm Beach to Boston, will increasingly be determined in Beijing, not Washington, D.C. One can only imagine Trump sitting like King Canute on a lawn chair at [Mar-A-Lago as it slowly disappears beneath the sea](#).

Since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, global trade liberalization has made China the factory of the world, bringing wealth to corporate America and lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. But as China rode the trade winds of globalization to become the world's second largest economy, its coal-fired power stations and lower environmental standards combined to produce [searing smog that now reduces life expectancy by up to 5.5 years](#) in the country's industrial north. The rapid increase in fossil fuels also propelled China to become the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases, the chief cause of global warming.

China morphing into clean energy champ

The good news is that China is in the midst of engineering a massive transition to an "ecological civilization," one that transcends Western industrial modernity and emphasizes clean energy, sustainable cities and [circular economies](#). China's 13th five-year plan (2015-2020) envisions bringing the country's [installed solar capacity to 140 gigawatts](#) to help cut greenhouse gas emissions. Its plan for rapid urbanization is also being accompanied by the development of over 200 new eco-cities that are already functioning as test labs for urban planners.

China's economic rise and its environmental challenges are also being accompanied by an equally important third factor: [the increasing significance of China's traditional culture and religion in its social and political discourse](#). Most significant here is the positioning of Confucius as the patriarch par excellence of Chinese culture, and a bulwark against liberal Western values.

Confucian values emphasize filial piety, deference to authority and the priority of family relationships over the individual. President Xi Jinping has deftly deployed these values in his anti-corruption drive. As China assumes the leadership of the global environmental movement, the question that arises now is how future [climate change](#) language and policy will be increasingly shaped by Chinese, not Western, values.

Over 2,000 years ago, China's rulers embarked on two spectacular engineering projects. The better known of the two is the Great Wall, a vast and costly fortification against the barbarians of the north.

Walls or water? China opting for water

The second, lesser known, is the [Dujiangyan irrigation system](#) in Sichuan province, a UNESCO [world heritage site](#). Still in use today, it uses a system of weirs and levees to regulate the spring floods along the Min river and provide water to over 5,300 square kilometres of land,

producing some of China's most fertile agricultural land. When I interviewed local officials during my fieldwork in China, they lauded it as a marvel of Daoist engineering for harnessing nature's power instead of working against it.

The choice between walls and water is an apt metaphor for the decisions facing world leaders today. Trump campaigned on a wall with Mexico. President Xi, meantime, has strengthened China's great firewall, which limits the choices and freedoms of Chinese citizens. While China's leaders feared America's power, it was only natural that they should seek to limit its influence.

But in the end, as China's rulers discovered, walls ultimately crumble, while the power of water is eternal. The Dujiangyan irrigation system continues to this day and is an essential component in China's food security system. As China's Daoist philosophers wrote more than 2,000 years ago: "Nothing in the world is as soft and weak as water. But when attacking the hard and strong nothing can conquer so easily." In the end, nature wins.

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