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Desires: Capitalism, The Pope and Chinese Medicine

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Prologue: Pope Francis and Zhang Taiyan ???

On 16 June 2015, Pope Francis published [*Laudato Si'*](#) (*Be Praised*), an encyclical letter on climate change tellingly subtitled “On Care for Our Common Home.” The encyclical links the destruction of the environment with the exploitation of the poor, and it unambiguously roots both in capitalism’s pernicious gluttony [10]. In the Pope’s analysis, neither technoscience nor the market are capable of averting an impending ecological catastrophe. Avoiding disaster will require a full-scale reassessment of contemporary human values, a turning away from consumerism to sobriety and self-constraint.

In a single stroke that stays true to his carefully chosen regnal name, Pope Francis thereby turned himself into one of the most preeminent critics of the contemporary world order [8]. An [editorial](#) in the *Guardian* referred to *Laudato Si'* as “the most astonishing and perhaps the most ambitious papal document of the past 100 years.” The conservative backlash, particularly in the US, was ferocious. [\[a\] Jeb Bush](#), a spokesperson for the unconstrained exploitation of the environment within neoliberal economies of desire, chose the first day of his presidential campaign to point out that his being Catholic does not mean he will take his economic politics from the Pope. [Rush Limbaugh](#) referred to Pope Francis as a Marxist. Fox News’ Greg Gutfeld not only repeated this description but called Pope Francis one of the most dangerous men on the planet for wanting to be a “modern pope” – which, come to think of it, is a rather insightful analysis, though beyond the modern would perhaps be a more apt description. For by reinserting morality (or religion) into science and politics Pope Francis is seeking to bridge once more the cleavages that mark out the modern [1].

And therein lies the rub. For even as his intervention challenges the modern constitution, indeed calls it fundamentally flawed and outright dangerous, as pontiff of the church Pope Francis simultaneously represents the very institution against which modernity, at least in the

West, historically struggled to emerge [6]. This history makes it difficult for the Roman Catholic church to represent an alternative to the modern that would not simply take us back to where we already have been [4]. Which is, of course, precisely the point that Jeb Bush is making when he asks the pope not to mix religion with politics.

To sidestep these objections, I want in this essay to insert *Laudato Si'* into a lineage of quite different critiques of capitalism. These are largely unknown to contemporary western audiences but informed, like Pope Francis, by attempts to make religion and ethics speak to politics and science in unexpected but powerful ways [1].

In the early 20th century, exposed to the destructive forces of modern imperialist capitalism, Indian and Chinese scholars also mobilized the intellectual power of long-standing traditions of thought and practice to think through the changes that engulfed them, to locate potential means of resistance, and to imagine alternative futures [4, 9, 11]. Viewed from this other historical perspective, *Laudato Si'* is a comparable contemporary response to the destructive forces of modernity, which forces were then transforming Asian ways of being and are now threatening the world more drastically than ever.

One of these thinkers, largely unknown in the West and increasingly forgotten also in China, was Zhang Binglin??? (1868-1936), commonly known by his courtesy name Taiyan??. Zhang Taiyan was a major intellectual figurehead of the nationalist revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty in 1911. As a scholar trained in classical Chinese modes of research, he was also the most eminent philologist of his time [6, 7, 8]. He understood that China's problems were tied to an increasingly intrusive imperialist world order, and in response he drew on Nietzsche and Hegel, Indian logic and China's own philosophies, to think through alternatives [4, 9]. He was a proponent of modern science but throughout his life never relinquished deep-seated attachments to Chinese medicine or Buddhist practice.[\[b\]](#)

By and large his modern biographers have found it impossible to come to terms with such a multi-faceted person [4]. His commitment to Chinese medicine, for instance, is written out of his life by those who champion Zhang as a hero of China's turn towards the modern and as a critic of Western imperialism.[\[c\]](#) Chinese medicine practitioners and cultural conservatives, meanwhile, celebrate the same person as a champion of China's national essence (*guocui* ??), conveniently forgetting his argument that China's past was gone not only for good but also for good reasons [10].[\[d\]](#)

It is precisely this contradictory complexity that makes critics like Zhang

Taiyan and Pope Francis so dangerous to moderns of any persuasion. I, too, take seriously traditions – specifically East Asian medicines – as a mode of thinking with which the contemporary should be critically engaged. Not in order to re-constitute a vanished past but in order to imagine a different future. The multi-logue developed in this essay [4] – between capitalism and the contemporary world order; Pope Francis, Zhang Taiyan and their critics; and Chinese medicine as a tradition that has much to say on desire – is, I hope, an example of the potential productiveness of this approach. It challenges the modern distinctions between bodies and minds, the individual and the social, self and non-self, politics and science not by opposing such divides with a truer, more real alternative, but by pointing to modes of grasping their productive interconnections [1, 2, 7], including those that might be established between the Pope, who one might guess still believes in a world beyond the here and now, and Chinese physicians like Zhang Taiyan, for whom that world is but a flow of ever changing constellations [7].

Needs and Wants: A Chinese medicine view from the 19th century

In the 19th century a group of Chinese medicine physicians conceptualized human physiology in ways that can help us to ground Pope Francis' philosophy – something we can accept or reject as belief – in the very physiology of life, in something that we embody and that we therefore ignore at our own peril. What follows is a simplified view of that physiology.[\[e\]](#)

Life is engendered and maintained by different kinds of vitalities. In a healthy organism these vitalities check and support each other, but they are as likely to become causes of disease [3].

The first of these vitalities is what in Chinese medicine is called 'the protective' (*wei* ?). The etymology of the term links to military forces deployed in defense of the realm [1, 2, 11]. In medical writings 'the protective' therefore evokes imaginaries of fierceness and mobility, of a vitality that is necessary but that is also potentially difficult to control. The sources of the protective are tied to the very conception of life. They emit from its wellspring in the 'gate of vitality' (*mingmen* ??), also known as the 'cinnabar field' (*dantian* ??) in the lower abdomen, which is the focus of all the internal alchemical traditions (*neidan* ??) for 'nourishing life' (*yangsheng* ??). From its source in the gate of vitality the protective spreads throughout the body, diffusing it with warmth, filling the body so there is no space into which anything from the outside may invade [7]. That does not mean that nothing is let in or out. Life, after all, depends on food and drink, on language and communication, on the tenderness of touch, on sweating and urination [2]. Yet, the power of the protective is such that it can transform whatever reaches us from the outside into

essences (or aspects of self) from which, in turn, further protective vitalities may emerge [3].

Quite early on, Chinese physicians realized that what protects and transforms also, however, is a potential threat. For protection is a desiring, the creation of boundaries, the attempt to turn what is in the exterior into something that maintains the interior, an expansive force whose limits are potentially endless [1]. The protective is thus also the sexual power of arousal, the basis of imagination, that which may extend life beyond the present [9, 11]. When these powers are not controlled, when forces of the wild within ourselves burn freely they scorch and exhaust the essences they are meant to guard. Instead of providing immunity from what threatens from the outside they inflame the inside as forces of auto-intoxication and self-destruction [11]. Uncontrolled, our desiring vitalities threaten the centers of power in the Heart (*xin* ?), inflaming its imaginations and robbing it of the stillness necessary for clarity of spirit (*shenming* ??) that underpins effective action [5].

The libidinal economy of the body therefore requires other vitalities, too, ones that can keep the ever expansive desiring forces within ourselves in check. There are two of these, one originating within the body/person, the other without. Within ourselves lies the 'constructive' (*ying* ?). The etymology of this term evokes the barracks or battalion headquarters in which the protective is stationed from time to time, where it is nourished but also from where it receives its orders. The constructive is thus a managing power (*jingguan* ??) that succeeds in directing the protective because it is able to provide it with stable sustenance and purpose [6]. Its ability to do so is grounded in learning, memory and the ongoing construction of a supple self [11]. If the constructive fails to impose these powers, the protective lacks constraint, turning into a destructive force that will sweep through the body like a blazing fire. On the other hand, it is only because of the transforming powers of the protective *wei* that the constructive *ying* can be assimilated from food, drink, and whatever else the outside affords as nourishment [2,3,6,7,9,11].

The other check to the libidinal powers of the protective are the rhythms of society and nature that are gathered (*zong*?) into ourselves [3]. This vitality is embodied most visibly in the act of breathing that connects us rhythmically with the world outside. It is a gathering also into ourselves of the rules and regulations of the clan, the lineage, and the cultures that determine the rhythms of work and play, production and reproduction: Wimbledon following Roland Garros and preceding the US Open, or university semesters. And it is the rhythms of the natural world, too: of sleeping and waking, of the ebb and flow of the menstrual cycle, the waxing and waning of the moon, of summer following winter [6]. These rhythms gathered into ourselves interact with the protective and the

constructive, setting limits to the former and guiding the latter, smoothing all impetuous rushing, turning it into a gentler and more sustainable flow [7]. Yet, the setting of limits can as easily constrain the vital flows of life, slow down the constructive or strangulate the creative forces of the protective, causing them to become pent up and turn destructively inward, or to release themselves in sudden devastating explosions of uncontrolled vital force [10].

So what?

So how does the libidinal and constructive economy known to a group of late 19th century Chinese physicians speak to the impending ecological and economic catastrophes of the 21st century addressed by Pope Francis? First, I need to make clear that its value lies not in its status as an alternative mode of knowing, though Chinese medicine (or other Asian forms of knowledge) are frequently presented (or are represented) as “other epistemologies” [8]. Rather, they speak to problems of the present – our present – precisely because they are products of a history that brought China and Chinese medicine up against some of the very same issues that Pope Francis is thinking through in his *Laudato Si'* and that Zhang Taiyan thought when contemplating China becoming a modern nation.

Long before it encountered the West, culture and society in late imperial China already was engaged in a process of commercialization that depended on creating ever new appetites among an elite of bureaucrats and merchants. During the same period, the Chinese medical practitioners that treated this elite with increasing frequency diagnosed problems of an internal libidinal economy. If previously wind and cold penetrating the body from the outside had been primary pathogenic agents, now pent-up frustrations and excessive desires became ever more important [3, 10]. Pathologies of the body's own Gate of Vitality were particularly prevalent and problematic. Excited by desire, the heating vitalities or ‘dragon fire’ (*longhuo* ??) – the protective in the language of my 19th century physicians – that was meant to protect the body/person from external invasion were perceived to turn inward, inflaming body and mind in uncontrolled forms of auto-intoxication [3].

The next generation of Chinese medicine physicians, increasingly familiar with biomedical ideas imported from the West, were quick to link the vitalities of the dragon fire with the language of immunity and its pathologies with process of inflammation and, nowadays, auto-immunity [11]. The goal, all too often, became to show that Chinese medicine, too, was modern, or, indeed, had been modern all along.

The 19th century physicians whose libidinal economy I have outlined here,

however, including Zhang Taiyan, entertained a different perspective. Known collectively as the “current of convergence” (*huitong xuepai* ???), they imagined medicine as a field of practice sustained by the confluence of different traditions and streams of knowledge [6].^[f] Zhang Taiyan, for instance, taught his students to employ certain forms of South Asian logic as a system for sharpening Chinese medical diagnostics, to learn from Japanese readings of Chinese medical classics, and to value Western scientific methods as tools if not as ends [9].^[g] Through such plural practice, Zhang Taiyan challenged both traditional Chinese and modern western claims regarding the existence of a single authentic tradition with access to universally valid knowledge [8]. His Buddhist studies, moreover, led him to advocate the pursuit of an embodied transcendence that could negate world, time, and history. Yet, as his life-long involvement in medicine demonstrates, he also explored and advocated concrete effective action in pursuit of the common good. Such action is, by definition, political but, when viewed from the perspective of a physician/philosopher like Zhang Taiyan, roots a body politic in the politics of the body [4].

Which takes us back to Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*. My purpose in this essay has not been to examine or critique the Pope’s analysis of the contemporary world order. Rather, by bringing it into conversation with Chinese medicine, and turning more explicitly to the body, I wish to show possibilities for intellectual flows of convergence that sidestep thinking the present merely through western philosophies and their foundational assumptions and histories, even as it ties the social to the personal, the body to the environment, and care for the self to politics at large [4, 6, 11]. From the perspective of 19th century Chinese physiology the question of how to safeguard human life is never, therefore, a choice between a ‘progressive’ turn to technology and science that must *perforce* accept their auto-intoxicating excesses [10] and a conservative tempering of life that promises to steer us to some pure and uncorrupted but, by implication, still and lifeless essence. Rather, these physicians would argue, life can be sustained – that is, continually nourished, renewed, managed, and made productive – only if all of our vitalities interpenetrate [4, 7]. The burning of desire is the physiological *sine qua non* of life. However, it is up to each of us individually and collectively whether and how such desire will be tempered through morality, learning, and the institutions that engender and transmit them. These relations are charged with tensions but precisely in this manner they generate a flow that reaches towards (*tong* ?) the future [7]. It is the very purpose of medicine to engage with these tensions productively. It is a matter for us to begin the process of translating – and thereby reshaping and revitalizing – these resources into tools for the present.

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Notes

[a]. For a synopsis see Denise Robbins. 18 June 2015. Conservative Media vs. The Pope: The Worst Reactions To Pope Francis' Climate Change Encyclical. *Media Matters for America*. Accessed at <http://mediamatters.org/research/2015/06/18/conservative-media-vs-the-pope-the-worst-reacti/204037> on 20.10.2015.

[b] For biographies of Zhang Taiyan from a variety of perspectives see Shimada Kenji, *Pioneer of the Chinese Revolution: Zhang Binglin and Confucianism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Kauko Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism in the Late Qing Dynasty: Zhang Binglin as an Anti-Manchu Propagandist*, (London: Curzon, 1990); Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[c] See any of the biographies listed above in note 2.

[d] Hu Yue ???. 'Zhonggui gexin daoshi Zhang Taiyan ??????????'. (Zhang Taiyan: leader of national medical reform).' *Chinese Journal of Medical History* ??????, 4 (1995). Chen Yu ??, and Xu Jingsheng ???. 'Qianlun Zhang Taiyan dui zhongyi wenxianxue zhi gongxian ??????????????' (A Synopsis of Zhang Taiyan's contribution to Chinese medicine's literary culture.' *Journal of Chinese Medicine Literary Culture* ??????, 3 2005; Duan Xiaohua ???, and Chang Gongyi ???. 'Zhang Taiyan yixue yanjiu lichen jianche ??????????' (A brief analysis of the development of Zhang Taiyan's medical research).' *Journal of the Jiangxi College of Chinese Medicine* ??????????, 6 2008.

[e] The physicians on whose work I am drawing on are Zhou Xuehai ???, particularly his book *Random Notes While Reading Medicine (Duyi suibi ?????)*, 1898 (reprinted by Jiangsu kexue jishu chubanshe, Nanjing: 1985); and Tang Rongchuan ???, particularly his book *Discussion of Blood Patterns (Xuezheng lun ???)*, 1884 (reprinted by Renmin weisheng chubanshe, Beijing: 1980).

[f] For a brief history of this current in relation to Chinese medical modernisation see Volker Scheid, *Currents of Tradition in Chinese Medicine, 1626 – 2006* (Seattle: Eastland Press, 2007), pp. 204-206.

[g] Ibid., pp. 208-211.

AMA citation

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