

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

April 7, 2016

Jim Logan

Partners in Grime

If the world is going to do something about protecting the environment and climate change, the two biggest polluting nations, the United States and China, need to work together — now. That’s the impetus for an ambitious conference, “The Environment: Issues & Strategies in the U.S. & China,” April 15 and 16 in McCune Hall on the sixth floor of the UC Santa Barbara Humanities and Social Sciences Building.

Organized by UCSB’s Confucius Institute, the conference will bring together scholars from both countries, said [Mayfair Yang](#), the institute’s director. “It’s very important for the two big countries to come together and set a good example for the rest of the world,” she said.

Given the scale and complexity of climate change, it will take an interdisciplinary approach to make a dent in the problem, Yang noted, and the conference will reflect that. “Scientific knowledge alone cannot produce changes in human behavior,” she said. “We must harness the social sciences, the arts and humanities, and the media to make needed social changes.” Scholars from each country will present papers in panels focused on natural and social sciences, environmental ethics, political economy and media.

One keynote speaker is Jianguo “Jack” Liu of Michigan State University. He is director of the Center for Systems Integration & Sustainability, the Rachel Carson Chair in Sustainability and a distinguished professor of fisheries and wildlife. Dale Jamieson of New York University will deliver the other keynote address. He is chair of the

environmental studies department, a professor of philosophy and founding director of environmental studies and its affiliate, the Animal Studies Initiative.

Although the two countries are the top polluting nations, Yang noted their responses have been quite different. “We have known about the science of climate change for a long time, but it hasn’t made much difference in terms of our policy makers, our politicians,” she said. “The U.S. is such a huge country for climate change deniers, contrary to China. While China is a huge polluter, they don’t deny climate change. They have made a lot of effort to try to stem it.”

The Chinese are making progress, said Yang, who is a professor of religious studies and of East Asian language and cultural studies. It’s not easy, however, and change won’t be immediate. “In China they actually have very good environmental laws on the books,” she explained. “The main problem is implementation, especially among lower-level local officials. China also has this problem of not moving quickly to shut polluting industries, because what are they going to do with those people out of jobs? They have to do it in a balanced way, not in a radical way.”

One of the curious drivers of environmentalist efforts in China is the role of religion, Yang said. Traditional religions such as Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, suppressed during Mao’s Cultural Revolution and dismissed as primitive superstitions by early Western observers, are making a comeback. “I think China is emerging from the shadow of being too smitten with 19th century Western evolutionist thought,” she noted. “And China is trying to go back to its ancient roots and trying to come into a new recognition of the value of ancient thought, and making ancient thought relevant and adapted to modernity.”

Confucianism, with its themes of reverence of ancestors and familial obligations, makes the task of protecting the Earth a personal responsibility, Yang explained. “For environmental stewardship of the planet it also says that you have an obligation to your descendants,” she said. “You can’t leave this world a mess for them to pick up the pieces, for them to barely be able to survive.

“So we need to bring that kind of thinking back in, this obligation between generations,” Yang added. “There’s this interconnectedness across generations between the dead and the living and the yet-to-be-born, because our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will be cursing us. Our generation plundered the Earth and we barely did anything about it.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.