

**Fudan Tyndall Centre / Global Research Forum on  
Sustainable Production and Consumption**

**Global Transitions to Sustainable Production  
and Consumption Systems**

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**Speech by John Ashton**

**My Chinese Dream**

[Opening in Chinese]

1. Everybody's talking about the Chinese dream.

现在大家都在谈中国梦！

2. I wish I could have a Chinese dream. As you can see, I'm not Chinese. I am British. As a foreigner, maybe I'm not allowed to have a Chinese dream.

我也想拥有一个自己的中国梦。可是你们看得出来我不是中国人，我是英国人。因为我是外国人，我想一想，我是否允许有一个中国梦？

3. But China is part of me too. I lived in China for seven years. My wife is Chinese. Our son has chosen to live under his Chinese name not his English one.

可是，中国是我生命的一部分。我曾在中国住过7年，我太太是中国人，我儿子坚持要人叫他的中文名字。

4. My late uncle came to Shanghai in 1947 and stayed until 1950. He learned Shanghai dialect. While Jiang Jingguo was still running this city with an iron fist he risked his life alongside the workers in his factory in the underground struggle for China's liberation.

我舅舅在1947年来到上海，一直住到1950年。他学会说上海话。当时在蒋经国的铁拳下，他冒着生命的危险和他工厂的工人一起从事地下工作，为中国的解放铺路。

5. My heart beats with yours. I don't feel it's unpatriotic towards my own country to say that. To want what is best for China and its people is what a good British citizen should want. We have built through globalization a world so interconnected and interdependent that now we can only succeed all together or fail all together.

我们都呼吸着同样的空气。我这么说，一点儿也不觉得不爱国。现在我们的命运在这世界是紧紧相连的，我认为作为一个爱国的英国人都希望中国富强，中国人民生活幸福。现在我们建立了全球化，我们得选择成功共存，要不然就会失败共亡。

6. So, will you allow me to have a Chinese dream of my own? Just so I can share it with you, while we are together in this room?
7. Please raise your hand if you give me permission to have a Chinese dream of my own. [Raised hands.]

说到这儿，你们会允许我说说我的中国梦吧？！现在我们都在同一个房间，请你们一起分享我的中国梦，要是你同意的话，请举手！

8. I wish I could keep speaking to you like this, in Chinese. I'm afraid that these days my Chinese is not as reliable as it used to be. It is rusty. Forgive me but it will probably be better for all of us if I now go back to English to tell you about my Chinese dream.

我很想用中文继续说下去，可是现在我的中国话已经不如从前，有点儿生锈了！请原谅我，就让我用英文说我的中国梦把！

[PAUSE. Now in English]

9. My Chinese dream is a dream of earth.
10. It was in the yellow earth that the first seed of this nation took root. Out of earth carried by great rivers down from the mountains, through the plains of north and central China to the sea, out of earth you rose.
11. In soured earth, China's dream will be a sour dream. If what you breathe is not pure, if what you drink is not pure, if what you eat is not pure, China's dream will become sour. If you cannot trust those who on whom you rely for the purity of what you breathe, what you drink and what you eat, China's dream will be a sour dream.
12. In the imagination of my ancestors, there arose long ago a separation between human beings and Nature. A separation, and a dominion. A belief that we humans are superior to Nature. That it is our destiny to exploit and manipulate Nature to suit our own purposes.

13. This belief probably goes back to the moment nearly 10,000 years ago when Indo-European pioneer farmers learned to cultivate wheat on what is now the Anatolian plain of Turkey. They discovered for the first time that they could grow more than they needed. That made possible the first cities but also the accumulation of power. With that came a loss of humility, an arrogance, towards Nature.
14. I'm afraid this belief in separation and dominion proved contagious.
15. It was built into the culture of the industrial revolution and of the early capitalists. Engels understood the danger. "For each victory", he wrote, "Nature takes its revenge on us". But his insight did not prevent the same belief being transplanted into the foundations of what became Marxist-Leninism.
16. And still today the belief in separation and dominion underpins the supercharged model of growth that since the fall of the Berlin Wall has been shaping all the major economies. Maybe not always in theory: China's leaders have long spoken of the need for harmony with Nature. But in practice, on the ground, as you know, that remains aspiration not reality.
17. But Nature cannot be exploited and manipulated freely. It does take revenge. We are part of Nature, not apart from it. To take from it more than it can regenerate, to tear up an ecological fabric on which we depend utterly but which we still do not fully understand, is not only pollution but self-harm. It is no different from cutting off our own limbs.
18. Nature is our mirror. If we look at Nature and see ourselves, we can live a good life on the good earth.

19. In good earth China's dream will bear sweet fruit.  
From good earth China will rise.
20. My Chinese dream is a dream of fire.
21. We humans are restless. We are never still, never satisfied. Whatever we have we always look for more. A fire burns in our breasts that never goes out, that always needs more fuel.
22. We British tend to think we are different from our neighbours. We think the sea that surrounds us and divides us from the rest of our continent has been a barrier behind which we built a nation in our own image.
23. The sea was never a barrier. It has always been a bridge. With the waves of the sea have come waves of people, looking on our shores for something more. More territory, more power, more wealth; or just a better prospect of survival.
24. We did not build Britain in our own image. We were forged and are still being forged in a crucible from different peoples kept in flux by the fire that burns in our breasts.
25. The fire burns, but must not burn out of control. When it burns out of control there are no dreams only nightmares.
26. We have learned to contain the fire that burns in our breasts, to quench it when it flares up, so that we ourselves are not consumed in its flames. We have had to learn that we cannot always have what we desire. We have had to learn to control our passions. We have had to learn to treat other people as we would wish to

be treated ourselves. And that has taught us how true fulfillment comes from seeing ourselves in each other's faces.

27. And so we manage, most of the time, to bring our own appetites into line with the needs and rituals of the society to which we belong.
28. If we do not do that, history shows us, the strong exploit the weak; the wealthy plunder from the earth and turn it sour; corruption spreads like weeds in a field of crops.
29. Every footprint we make now treads on top of somebody else's. As with people so today with nations.
30. Confucius understood. He urged us to cultivate a quality that is not easy to translate into English, a kind of benevolent virtue, what you call in Chinese "ren" (仁). He asked:

*if we are without virtue, how can there be culture?*

*if we are without virtue, how can there be harmony?*

人而不仁，如礼何？

人而不仁，如乐何？

31. If your fire burns without virtue, China's dream will be consumed in its flames.
32. We are mirrors for each other. If we can look in our neighbour's face and see ourselves, we can build good societies, a good global society and we can live a good life.

33. In virtuous fire, China will forge an alloy that is strong and bright. In virtuous fire, China will rise.
34. My Chinese dream is a dream of water.
35. The water flows from its source in the mountains to the sea. As we stand on the bank we see its flow, and in the flow of water we see the flow of time, from yesterday to tomorrow, from the source in the mountains to the sea where all rivers become one.
36. The river carries the memory of its passage.
37. The earth from which it sprang, the rocks, the shoals, the channels and banks shaped by its restless currents. Seeping, tinkling, tumbling, foaming, rushing, meandering through meadows like a drunkard on a spree then, sobered now by the tug of the tide, pressing onward, cutting through flood plain, slicing through cities towards estuary or delta: the water remembers every moment in its descent from the plateau, carrying all its memories to the sea where they dissolve in the memories already there.
38. If the river cannot reach the sea, it becomes turbid. If the river can never reach the sea all our dreams will evaporate leaving only a crust of dirty salt on the parched and barren earth.
39. If the river cannot reach the sea, memory is blocked and history hidden from the people. Our memory and our history make us who we are. If memory is blocked and history hidden from the people, we cannot know where we came from. We cannot imagine a better future nor build a solid path to it. We cannot dream.

40. History will not stay hidden. If we try to hide it, it will haunt us, like the ghost of the murdered Banquo in Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy of power and ambition, of fire without virtue.
41. No nation ever comes fully to terms with its history. There are always memories that it seems easier to forget than to face up to. My country is rich in them. You can see some of our memories from here more clearly than we can.
42. Before the liberation, businesses from many countries exploited China. My uncle worked for a British company called Calico Printers. They had a factory in Shanghai, and in his early twenties he was appointed as its General Manager.
43. My uncle loved Shanghai and loved China. He learned Putonghua as well as Shanghai dialect. He studied your history and devoured your books. He could recite poetry by Li Bai and Du Fu. With brush and ink he could write in a dashing cursive hand, and paint in the Chinese style.
44. As a child he thrilled me with his talk of heroes like Zhu Geliang and, especially, Sun Wukong, the monkey king. Perhaps I liked him the most because I was born in the Year of the Monkey!
45. My uncle loved China but he was part of an unequal system, a system imposed by power without virtue not built in true partnership, a system that exploited the Chinese people. We in Britain rarely talk now about that part of our history. You can see some of our memories more clearly than we can.

46. When I was living in Beijing, in 1983, I arranged for my uncle to return to Shanghai. He visited his old factory, by then the Shanghai Number Two Textile Factory.
47. Most of the people my uncle had worked with had died or retired. But two were still there. And he told me of the rivers of tears that mingled as they embraced each other, as they each remembered. In that moment my uncle and his Chinese comrades looked in the mirror of each other's eyes. Their memories flowed together, into the same sea.
48. Such moments come once in a lifetime, if at all. But unless we come to terms with our past, with the stories that are hard to face as well as those of which we speak with pride - unless we do that we cannot know who we are and we cannot build a future.
49. If the river is blocked, if your memories cannot flow unobstructed to the sea, China's dream will be sucked like salty tears into the parched and barren earth.
50. In the unobstructed river, you can see where you came from and where you need to go. As it flows towards the sea China's people can truly come to know themselves and China will rise.
51. My Chinese dream is a dream of air.
52. We must keep our feet on the ground. If we cannot fill our bellies we cannot be happy.
53. But if your belly is full, you may still be unhappy. People with full bellies can be hungrier than those who have just enough to eat.

54. We cannot be happy if our spirit cannot fly through the air.
55. When I lived in Beijing thirty years ago, people used to fly kites. On some days the air above Tiananmen Square was full of kites, each striving to fly higher than all the others in a sky more often blue than it is now.
56. Next to Tiananmen is the Zijincheng, the City Forbidden to the people.
57. The sky above Tiananmen will sooner or later fill again with kites, bearing the spirit of a new generation to a lofty height. From the air, there is no city that can be forbidden to the people.
58. My wife sometimes reminds me to keep my feet on the ground. She knows me well and she is right to do so. But if I had not as a young man released my spirit to fly through the air like a kite, I would not have learned why we must see the world as it looks to others as well as ourselves, I would not have tried so hard to see myself as others see me.
59. If we stay always on the ground; if we define ourselves by what we can put in our bellies, and by what we own and what we consume, even when we have sufficient; if that's how we construct who we are, how we compose our face when we know it is observed.....well if we do that we will destroy ourselves and all our dreams will crumble to dust. Whatever you can buy is made of dust and will return to dust. But your spirit is immortal.
60. On the ground we build walls. From the air, no wall can conceal what lies behind it. From the air we can

see the world as it is. Flying through the air my spirit can brush against yours, lifting us both higher still.

61. If we are to dream together our spirits must take to the air.

62. In the air, under a blue sky, the spirit of China will rise. China will rise. China will rise because we are all rising together.

63. Nobody can rise alone. That is the condition of our world today.

[PAUSE]

64. Over the next three days, we will be discussing sustainable production and consumption.

65. We need to discuss it because we have locked ourselves into a pattern of production and consumption that is not sustainable. Out of conversations like ours we can build a shared understanding of why we find ourselves in this predicament; how we can escape it; and the obstacles we need to overcome.

66. With such a shared understanding we can work out what we need to do to establish a new model for the economy and society, a model that can give us the feeling of progress we crave without, like our current model, watering the seeds of its own destruction.

67. This is a problem about how we treat each other and how we treat Nature. It is a problem about how and to whom and for what we hold ourselves accountable.

68. These are existential questions. They are not about what we should do but about who we are, and who we aspire to be.
69. However much we know about what we need to do, and how hard we try to do it, we will not escape our predicament unless we come to terms with who we need to be.
70. It is in our dreams, and only in our dreams, that we can imagine who we need to be. That is why we must talk about dreams.
71. From our current position, locked as we are ever more tightly into unsustainable development, the task ahead seems daunting. The forces shaping the economy are awesome. Just look around, here in Shanghai. How can we possibly take control of those forces and build a different kind of economy?
72. But we can always make a big task smaller by breaking it down into its parts. It seems to me there are three central problems, or as Marx might have put it three contradictions we need to resolve. I prefer to think of them as battles we need to win, because as Marx also understood any process of transformation - and this is a process of transformation - is at its heart about power, more specifically about power relations, and success cannot be achieved without political struggle.
73. In all three battles, each army flies a banner. On one banner is written "we cannot be better than this". On the other are the words "we are better than this".
74. Our dream is a victory dream. We are not winning yet but we have to win and we will win.

75. The first battle is the battle for climate security. Only if we win this battle can victory in the other two be meaningful. If we lose this battle, Nature really *will* have its revenge. The conditions for sustaining a successful economy will have been lost.
76. Shanghai is in the front line. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has always been cautious in forecasting how fast the sea is likely to rise. The problem in this area of science is that the dynamics of collapsing ice sheets are not well understood.
77. But if you talk to the scientists grappling with this, some of them will say privately that they cannot rule out an early catastrophic collapse of the ice sheet in the West Antarctic, and if that happens the sea could rise by more than 2m in the lifetime of people who have already been born. This has happened before, at such a rate. And two papers published just a few weeks ago set out evidence for the first time in peer reviewed literature that the West Antarctic Ice Sheet is now in irreversible decline.
78. I find it hard to imagine how Shanghai could cope with 2m of sea level rise in just a few decades.
79. But in any case, globally, without climate security there can be no food, water or energy security. Without food, water or energy security there can be no national security, and no human security.
80. Without climate security, we cannot build global solutions to global problems based on cooperation. We will be at the mercy of events, having lost the capacity to choose our destiny.

81. To win the battle for climate security we need to build over the coming generation an energy system without carbon emissions. We know how to do that. We have the technology we need. We are wealthy enough - China is wealthy enough. The question is, do we have the will? Can we make this part of our dream?
82. This part of our dream will be an electric dream.
83. It will be about using electricity less wastefully, to meet more of our needs, including for heating and mobility. Electricity will displace the gas and oil we use now for those purposes.
84. And it will be about generating electricity with no emissions, largely from renewable sources, balanced over large active grids like the one China is building. This will displace the gas and coal we use now to make electric power.
85. By the way, shale and other unconventional oil and gas cannot be part of this dream, they are about yesterday not tomorrow.
86. This electric dream is a good dream. If we make it real it can bring us more growth, more jobs, and better lives than any other energy dream. But the market alone cannot make it real, and we have now built a global economy that is being shaped largely by forces released by the market.
87. And that's the second battle. It is not a battle to abolish the market. That has been tried before and it didn't work. It is a battle to make the market our servant not our master.

88. The problem is that the market has no purpose, no goal. If we are subservient to the market we can't dictate the destination, we must go wherever it takes us. It is like being chained to a wild animal.
89. Where I come from in recent years we have been chained to a tortoise, but in China you are chained to a hungry tiger.
90. Here is a lesson from history.
91. In Europe during the industrial revolution we experienced more change over a few decades than we had over centuries before that.
92. People moved in millions from the countryside to the cities to work in the new mechanized factories. Some, including those who owned the factories, became rich. They learned how to use their wealth to buy power and to manipulate the market so that they could become even richer. They learned how to exploit those who needed the jobs only they could provide. Huge gaps opened up, in income and in opportunity. Does that sound familiar?
93. Marx and Engels noticed that this was an unstable situation. We were getting growth. But its consequences were undermining the social conditions that made growth possible. Market capitalism, said Marx, would destroy itself. The story of Europe over the next hundred years was a story, with lots of mistakes and conflict and grief on the way, of learning to invest some of the proceeds of growth so as to restore and maintain the social conditions needed to make further growth possible.

94. Today, as my friend Tom Burke has argued, we need to do the same thing globally; we need to do it much more quickly; and we need to restabilise not only the social conditions but also the environmental, ecosystem and resource conditions for growth, including the climate conditions. That's sustainable development, which includes sustainable production and consumption.
95. Have we really learned this lesson? We are certainly not acting on it. We, or at least our economic elites, are behaving as if the market really can take us where we need to get to. They say "you can't defy the market". I say "you can't defy history".
96. One problem is the question of growth itself. We have built a system in which everyone has an incentive to maximize growth in the short term, whatever the consequences. Not only that, but the intellectual toolkit we use for doing this, a toolkit based on neoclassical economics, takes it as given that if we intervene in the ways we need to intervene, we will get less growth. This circular argument blocks the path we need to find.
97. Some people say, understandably, that we therefore need to abandon growth. We need to find better measures of well-being. We cannot go on consuming at the rate we have been consuming. We must build an economy based on a kind of steady state.
98. I agree that we need better measures of progress and that we need to consume much less of what we currently consume. But I don't think we can abandon the idea of progress itself. People will always want progress, because of the fire in their breasts. They won't give up that prospect. Is China going to give up on progress?

99. We don't need to give up on progress. We may not even need to give up on growth, at least not yet.
100. It's now clear that those who claimed to know the formula for growth were Emperors with no clothes. They knew a lot less about their own concept than they admitted to the rest of us. That's why we had a crash in 2008.
101. The theory on which they have been basing their advice cannot encompass the importance for growth of resilience against shocks. It cannot comprehend that the economy is a thread that can only be stitched onto a strong fabric, a fabric of nature and society in balance with themselves and each other, with their homeostatic mechanisms intact, as those who study complex systems might say.
102. And crucially the theory cannot forecast how innovation will drive growth, especially when innovation is systemic.
103. The transition from a growth model that is high carbon, that wastes resources, and that cannot deal with shocks to one that is low carbon, resource efficient, and resilient is all about innovation. It is an opportunity for growth not a risk to it.
104. The old drivers for growth are becoming exhausted and we urgently need new ones. This is how we will build them. Any growth we lose by using less material can be more than offset by the new growth we gain by using material in smarter ways, and by the way we use knowledge, not least through digital technologies.

105. We do not have a fully developed theory to underpin this yet. We can see how some of it can be constructed but we will have to make the rest of it empirically, to make praxis the sole criterion of truth as you used to say in China. ( 实践是检验真理的唯一标准. )
106. But we can't do any of this if we remain in thrall to the market. We will have to intervene, top down as well as bottom up, to dictate the outcomes that the market must deliver for us.
107. Even if we win the climate battle and the market battle, there is still the battle about who we are, about how we define ourselves, the battle for our souls, you could say if you wanted to be melodramatic.
108. You see, in idolizing the market we pretend we are acting in accordance with an intellectual theory. But in fact we are making a political and moral choice about what it means to be a human being.
109. If we give up on telling the market what outcomes to deliver, we are squeezing the experience of being human into a narrow realm of individual choices, all focused on the pursuit of gratification through consumption. We are surrendering our capacity to exercise will, the precious gift of will that makes us human.
110. Bombarded by an unremitting cognitive assault designed to keep us wanting more, we come to measure ourselves increasingly according to how successful we are in our quest for material gratification. Under that assault we forget where we came from - what we have struggled for - so there is no past. And because, having surrendered our will to the market, the

future is simply whatever is going to happen to us not something we build ourselves, there is no future either.

111. This is a world of the perpetual present.

112. But is that really who we are?

113. What do we care most about? We care about our children. We want to give our children an assurance of security, happiness and fulfillment. Each generation has always wanted to pass on a better prospect to the next.

114. What is most torn in that fabric I mentioned earlier, the fabric of Nature and society in balance with themselves and with each other?

115. In my own country, never in my lifetime have our young people, people my son's age (it is his birthday today, he is 28), had so little confidence in their parents' generation. They love their parents, of course, most of them. But as a generation they think we are failing them. We have been good at providing for ourselves but we are not dealing with the threats to their prospects, including the threat of climate change.

116. They look at us and the banner they see us waving in the air displays the words "we cannot be better than this".

117. The bridge between the generations is broken. We have to repair it. We have to escape the perpetual present. That is the third battle.

118. As I was writing these words, veterans of my parents' generation were remembering what they did 70 years ago on the beaches of Normandy.

119. They ran from landing craft into a hail of bullets. Thousands died in minutes. But they understood how desolate was Hitler's dream and as they ran they carried banners with the words "we are better than this". As each soldier fell his comrade grabbed his banner. Each banner stayed aloft until Hitler was defeated and the war won. Perhaps the celluloid of old newsreels doesn't pick up the image of the banners. But you can sense their ghostly presence.
120. My parents went to war so that their children, my generation, would not have to. So that we could take for granted what so many of them died for.
121. And we did take it for granted. We took it for granted so much that we forgot why it mattered. We gorged on the fruits of their hard won victory and got drunk on the wine.
122. Some of those who went home from Hitler's war went on to Chicago, Madison Avenue, Wall Street. From those places and their satellites flowed the most intoxicating liquor of market-driven consumerism. But we cannot blame our fathers for that. They had no idea how addictive it was nor how fatal.
123. But we do know. Now there can be no excuses.
124. To win the third battle, to take the citadel, we have to remember the true value of our inheritance so we can leave our children a legacy to match it. We have to repair the bridge between generations.
125. You, scholars and thought leaders of Fudan University, the Tyndall Centre and other academic institutions, are not onlookers in these new battles. You

are combatants. If you fight well we will win and if you hesitate we will lose.

126. The Academy, the world of knowledge, is traditionally and for good reason separate from politics, the world of choice.

127. But if we don't now make choices that are informed by what we know about ourselves, about society and about Nature, we will lose all three battles.

128. You and the community you represent know a great deal about ourselves, about society, and about Nature. Over these three days you will be discussing questions like consumer values and trust; organic and factory farming; sustainable transport systems; industrial transformation and the circular economy; urbanization and ecocities; the low carbon economy in all its aspects; and ecological civilization.

129. What all your knowledge tells you is that there is no fundamental reason why we should not win the new battles. It is a question of will not means.

130. But the communication mechanisms between the world of knowledge and the world of choice, between the Academy and politics, are not working. They will not fix themselves. Politics in its current dysfunctional condition, detached in so many places from reality and from the people, will not fix them. It is your responsibility to fix them.

131. Some of you know that as individuals. But as a community I'm not sure that you do. You are not yet organized to honour that responsibility. In your careers you are rewarded more for staying in the cages of your disciplines than for breaking out of them, even into

other areas of academic discourse, let alone the world outside the ivory tower.

132. Politics takes different forms in different societies. But it is the only way any society has of making choices together.

133. That is why this conference is so important and why it is vital that you succeed in your effort to build a new academic endeavor, a force for transformation, that breaks down the barriers separating your many disciplines, that makes you all together greater than the sum of your parts, that reaches actively and with urgency into the world of choice.

PAUSE

134. The great Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote these lines, in his poem *Traveller, or Caminante*:

*Traveller, your footprints  
are the path and nothing more;  
Traveller, there is no path,  
The path is made by walking*

135. China's greatest modern writer Lu Xun wrote this, in his story *My Old Home*:

[In Chinese]

*I thought: hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the earth. For actually the earth had no roads to begin with. But when many men pass one way, a road is made.*

我想：希望是本无所谓有，无所谓无的。这正如地上的路。其实地上本没有路，走的人多了，也便成了路。

136. These two men, writing within a few years of each other on different continents, knew how to express what their people felt. Both understood that the path that will carry us from the reality of today to our dream about tomorrow, the path of hope, is a path we make with our own feet.

137. Your dream is my dream. Your Chinese dream. Our Chinese dream.