

Sky Righter

When a physicist trained in the methodology of Western science looks to the sky, he may envision chlorofluorocarbons breaking down under the power of the sun's ultraviolet rays. He may also perceive the chlorine produced by the reaction ripping the fabric of the stratosphere's protective ozone blanket, exposing the Earth to ultraviolet rays that have the potential to destroy all living things on the planet.

UCLA physics professor Alfred Y. Wong is a man possessed of an Eastern sensibility, which teaches life is to be sung in harmony with nature. He sees what a well-schooled physicist sees and more. He looks at European art and is struck by its impossible detail and complexity. He wonders at Western medicine's quick and forceful cures, mindful of the harsh side effects its practice often engenders. "The Chinese painting is very simple," observes Wong, "with only a few brush strokes and muted colors that tell a story. And the Chinese doctor prescribes herbs to strengthen the body, so the body can cure itself. We in Asia see things differently."

Wong's pan-cultural vision has brought him a seemingly plain solution to an opaque problem: Help the Earth heal itself. To that end, Wong has devised an ingenious process that calls for charging chlorine atoms in the atmosphere — that is, giving them an extra electron — so they no longer react with ozone. Without interference from chlorofluorocarbons, ozone in the atmosphere will build back to normal levels — naturally.

The idea has already proven viable in computer models and a laboratory recreation of the Earth's atmosphere; there are now plans to experiment with the process in the real world, beginning at the North Pole, where ozone depletion is worst. To implement his chlorine-charging process, Wong hopes to use huge 500-meter-long metal curtains borne aloft on giant solar-powered airships to altitudes of up to 25 miles above the Earth. The curtains will deliver electrostatic charges to neutralize chlorofluorocarbons in the upper atmosphere. "Always, people say not to play with Mother Nature," Wong says. "However, humans are already influencing nature by polluting. Since there is no way we as a species can stop polluting, I believe it is good to have an insurance policy."

Wong's approach has an elegance and grace that transcend its complex theoretical basis. "What I am trying to do," he explains, "is take Eastern philosophy and combine it with the Western advantage in science and technology and do it simply. Only a simple solution will work on such a global scale."

Even if successful, Wong's method of helping the Earth repair its ozone layer won't provide an overnight remedy for a hundred years of industrialized environmental abuse. It may, however, be an important beginning. "Here in the West, you want an instant cure," Wong reflects. "In the East things happen more slowly. There, we believe in long-term healing."

— Samantha Dunn



MICHAEL LEWELLYN

Alfred Y. Wong has devised a simple and graceful solution to a global problem.