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China's Coercive Environmentalism Revisited: Climate Governance, Zero Covid and the Belt and Road

Current Debate

Judith Shapiro, Yifei Li

It has been more than two years since the publication of our jointly written book, *China Goes Green: Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet*. Since then, multiple developments have confirmed and strengthened our core thesis that China's "ecological civilisation" framework and programmes serve not only to achieve lower carbon and other environmental goals but also to strengthen the hand of the state over individuals and communities – and even to help export the state's model of authoritarian governance. This short essay is intended to update this argument and to provide an overview of recent developments with respect to China's carbon policies, pandemic response and international investment on the Belt and Road. We find that rather than becoming more open to citizens' groups and public participation, the Chinese state is turning with yet more confidence to draconian approaches. As China rises to superpower status and Western democracies display ongoing inadequacies in dealing with a range of environmental problems and public health emergencies, and as the latter fail to address acute needs for capital and aid in the developing world, China has long abandoned its approach of "hiding its strength and biding its time", as Deng Xiaoping famously directed. The contributions to this special issue illustrate how China is now in pursuit of a far more active, prominent and assertive role in global affairs. More importantly, China beyond China is not simply an extension of the Chinese state's domestic experience, but amounts to a wholesale realignment of global environmentalism, geopolitics and technocracy.

In the prior volume (Part I) of this special issue, Ping Huang, Linda Westman and Vanesa Castan Broto deconstructed the meaning of "ecological civilisation"

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as it is used to promote the goal of social “harmony” (aka obedience) to the state. They showed how the state uses the concept selectively to achieve its environmental goals, deploying it for the purposes of environmental protection and the implementation of ecological “red lines” but not for supporting environmental litigation or governing resource extraction (both of which are more contentious). Given the intense, often uncritical excitement around China’s use of the concept, David Tyfield and Fabricio Rodríguez, in this volume (Part II), advance the conversation around this term, critically deconstructing its meanings and practice within China and “beyond China” in the international realm.

China and climate change

In the past few years, much attention has been paid to China’s plans to achieve carbon neutrality and peak emissions. Urgent attention to the climate crisis focused on COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 and Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt in 2022. While observers hoped China would live up to its “ecological civilisation” formulation and take the lead, they were disappointed when President Xi Jinping declined to attend and when both the United States and China, the world’s biggest emitters, experienced setbacks, casting doubt on whether the world would be able to achieve meaningful reductions in carbon emissions. In 2021, rolling blackouts and power cuts led the Chinese state to increase coal production, as there was a clear conflict between providing basic public goods such as electricity and reducing output from coal-fired power plants. Since then, coal production has only increased under economic pressure due to zero-Covid lockdowns. Such problems underline that the Chinese state has multiple competing agendas. It has done a poor job of involving the public in the climate change effort and of explaining the connection between energy use and rising sea levels, floods and extreme weather events.

Ironically, there is a surprising synergy between China’s top-down, technocratic and quantitative approach to climate governance and that of the international policy apparatus, which is increasingly turning toward geoengineering, computer modelling and forecasting, quantitative target-setting, “green” infrastructure construction and technological fixes at a time when other approaches seem to have failed. Whether focusing on the quantified amount of carbon that must be removed from the atmosphere in order to forestall devastating change or delineating target areas of sea and land that must be put aside as protected carbon sinks, international climate negotiators share a lot with Chinese policy makers’ basic approach. As we documented in *China Goes Green*, target-setting, campaign-style top-down approaches may often appear in the short term to provide results on paper, but in the long run they are not sustainable because they have not earned public buy-in and support. Nonetheless, given these syn-

ergies, and despite China's lack of significant global leadership in recent climate negotiations, we can expect China to become increasingly comfortable and dominant in its approach to climate change. Its status as an economic, political and military superpower leads other countries to defer to it both because it has become a valued source of international investment and because they hope that China's approach will provide a way forward at a moment when other solutions seem elusive.

That said, in Part I Dan Banik and Benedicte Bull argue that it is unlikely that China will assume a prominent leadership role in multilateral forums. They point out that while it is often thought that China's increased dominance of such institutions is due to support from small developing countries looking for a greater voice and perhaps a champion, China's approach does not allow much space for such voices and continues to favour bilateral relationships over multilateral ones. We may add that this has been China's preference for decades. For example, in the Mekong River region, China has adopted a divide-and-conquer approach by refraining from submitting to the Mekong River Commission's authority. A more nuanced understanding of China's rise to prominence in institutions ranging from the World Trade Organization to the World Health Organization may thus be advisable.

Even though many are disappointed that China has not done more at international climate fora, China has continued to expand initiatives in pollution control, carbon exchange, electric vehicles, waste control and alternative energy, and has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. On the domestic front, positive trends include aggressive efforts with respect to subsidies and incentives for electric vehicles, as well as investment in renewable energies such as solar and wind. The rollout of a national emissions-trading scheme has been successful enough that carbon is now expected to peak three years earlier than planned, in 2027.

Despite the ongoing construction of coal-fired power plants domestically, China has officially committed to stop building coal-fired power plants overseas (with uneven performance on that commitment). China's earlier claims that in building such plants it was merely responding to the needs and wishes of partners on the Belt and Road were widely criticised; it appears China has, uncharacteristically, bowed to international pressure in this regard.

Within China, climate change mitigation/adaptation and coercion are closely linked. Many low-carbon policies have strengthened state authoritarianism. For example, hydropower projects that local communities might once have successfully resisted have become enmeshed in international commitments to portfolio percentages for renewable energy. Recycling mandates nominally intended to reduce dependency on plastics made from fossil fuels serve to provide the state with new opportunities to intervene radically into the behaviour and movements of individual citizens. Data-driven carbon exchanges provide the state with yet more detail about the workings of enterprises and companies, while

at the same time intensifying the power of the state through its control of the allocation of pollution credits. Polluting companies are more easily shut down when carbon emissions are invoked as justification, even when such companies are small in scale and support the livelihoods of China's most vulnerable, as shown in the Chinese documentary film "Smog Town" (Han / Du 2019).

One important recent development is that resettlement programmes in nomadic areas are increasingly framed not only in terms of biodiversity conservation but also in terms of carbon sequestration. In climate-change negotiations, there has been a renewed emphasis on concepts such as "nature-based solutions" and a shifted focus towards forests and biodiversity. As their efforts to reduce fossil fuel use hit multiple roadblocks, negotiators have turned to the potential to reduce carbon by protecting "carbon sinks". Protected areas, reforestation and also the oceans have become a major part of this conversation, and expanding the areas of protected land and sea appears to be a win-win for biodiversity and the climate. In China, however, it will be essential to monitor how such protections are achieved. When climate change is added to justifications for relocating local communities and the ethnic minorities who rely on these lands, it becomes that much more difficult for them to maintain traditional livelihoods and identities.

China and zero Covid

China's "zero Covid" policy has much to teach about the connection between coercion and the state's approach to the delivery of public goods. The 2022 Covid lockdowns in Shanghai and multiple other cities, in particular, extend our argument into the public health realm. In Shanghai, in the name of stamping out even a flicker of the virus, agents at different levels of the city government issued multiple orders that disregarded the rule of law, citizens' wellbeing and basic science. They separated toddlers from parents, denied life-saving medical treatment to critically unwell patients, allowed the non-Internet-savvy elderly to run out of food and medicine, banned essential service workers from returning to their residences – leaving them to sleep in public phone booths or camp in tents under overpasses – and slaughtered pet dogs and cats when their Covid-positive owners were forced into makeshift quarantine camps. The city's official reports indicate that, of the 33,816 patients who tested positive, 22 developed severe conditions, all of whom were of old age and had pre-existing conditions (Ma et al. 2022). While the city indeed managed to keep Covid infection numbers at or near zero, this "success" story was overshadowed by numerous unofficial reports of suffering, hardship and even death. Some residents died at the doors of emergency rooms after being refused admission due to their lack of a sufficiently recent negative Covid test result. Many more died at home when un-

sympathetic officials ruled that medical attention was “unnecessary”. Numerous others faced severe food insecurity when the supply chain was brought to a complete halt in a city of 25 million. Some jumped from their high-rise apartments in despair.

Remarkably, the Shanghai lockdown was extensively documented, reported and analysed despite the censorship apparatus’s endless attempts to restrict and remove information. This was possible because of the sheer size of the population, their extensive ties to the outside world and the city’s substantial contingent of foreign residents who told their stories. Many other cities and provinces, from Jilin in the northeast to Chengdu and Dongxing in the southwest to Shenzhen in the southeast, languished in even more devastating lockdowns for much longer, but state censors had near-total success in preventing news from being leaked. The experience of Shanghai offers glimpses into the human costs of zero Covid.

What this tells us about state coercion and China’s authoritarian model is that, if anything, in the past two years the state has become even more confident in its use of invasive technologies that monitor individual behaviour, whether in “real life”, as when apartment doors open and trigger alarms at local security offices, or on the web, as when citizens attempt to vent their frustrations at the near-complete loss of freedom of movement, only to be “harmonised” (censored) and their posts erased. War language is routinely deployed by the state in its attempt to rise above the law, thus replicating its supposed success in the “war against air pollution” in the realm of public health. Daily, citizens in the most populous country on Earth are mobilised to join the war-like frenzy against Covid, lining up for tests, giving state authorities increasing access to private information and acquiescing to endless forcible lockdown and quarantine orders.

While framed as a public good (zero Covid), such intrusions by the state into the lives of ordinary individuals mark a new extreme of state intervention into the private sphere. Even a domestic train ride within China entails multiple mandatory PCR tests, as passengers are required to be tested at the points of departure, transfer and arrival. This is because local authorities refuse to acknowledge the validity of test results from other cities. These test results are then collected into government big-data centres, which assign various QR codes to citizens and residents alike. Numerous times each day, residents of China have had to display their health and travel QR codes in order to enter public places such as subway stations, schools, hospitals and shopping malls. These QR codes are color-coded like traffic lights, giving supposedly low-risk users a green code and high-risk ones a red one. The state has a monopoly over the algorithm behind the QR codes, and officials keep changing the color-coding rules to avoid being outsmarted by tech-savvy users. In various places in China, a red code has been assigned to individuals who have fully recovered from Covid, to those who were released from government quarantine camps, to those whose nucleic acid test results were inconclusive and to those who were in close contact

with a positive case or even in close contact with a close contact (aka secondary close contact) with a positive case. Moreover, as we saw in the June 2022 incident of would-be protestors who travelled to Zhengzhou when their bank deposits were frozen because of an investigation into corruption and financial malpractice, the state used its control of their online Covid statuses to stifle dissent on a completely unrelated matter. On the train, green Covid status turned magically to red and arrivals were detained. With the big exclamatory square of a Covid red code on one's cell phone, one is immediately cast out from the life previously known, powerless and at the mercy of the next state agent in a hazmat suit.

A similar development unfolded in Tangshan, where brutal gang violence against four young women drew national attention in June 2022. The local government acted swiftly, not to safeguard citizens, but to assign red health codes to everyone who dared to enter the city from outside to protest, and forcibly transporting incoming journalists, lawyers and rights activists to government-monitored quarantine facilities in the name of public health. Likewise, in Beijing, the local government bragged about the adoption of “smart technologies” at the entrances to residential compounds and industrial parks, where a robotic system checks for body temperature, health code status, vaccination record, citizenship status and other personal information, all within a nanosecond of a facial recognition scan. Health QR codes have given Chinese state authorities unprecedented ability to monitor and control the residents.

The Shanghai lockdown also showcases the strength and resilience of the people. When the supply chain for consumer products was cut off, residents banded together to make bulk purchases large enough to warrant direct delivery from suppliers. When the public transportation system was suspended, couriers on scooters volunteered to help strangers get to their destinations. When most hospitals and pharmacies were closed, residents relied on crowd-sourced guides to find essential medication, sometimes via clandestine channels. When getting food and water became a daily challenge, food service companies delivered free bento boxes to senior citizens living alone. We do not wish to romanticise community self-help under what was the world's most draconian lockdown, but to stress that when China's “zero Covid” policy rendered life impossible in the country's most industrialised city, ordinary people became each other's last resort.

China on the Belt and Road

In the past few years, the honeymoon period came to an end for many of China's Belt and Road partners. There has since been significantly more caution among those signing development deals, given the difficult experiences of Sri Lanka, Malaysia and other countries that found themselves unable to repay loans or were forced to renegotiate terms for projects that sounded better in concept

than they proved in implementation. But China remains the only game in town for much of the world.

With the financial difficulties of Covid lockdowns and concomitant supply chain disruptions, China's overall international investment volume declined (Duan et al. 2020). Still, even though coal has been dropped and some coal projects cancelled, there are grey areas in which Chinese investments in coal projects continue. Oil and gas investments have actually gone up since the coal ban was announced (Gallagher / Qi 2021).

Not every international investment made by China has some sort of nefarious alternative motivation – such as counterbalancing the West geopolitically, facilitating China's extraction of raw materials or placing weak countries in a dependent relationship with their “big brother”. Many such projects are indeed welcome and successful double wins for investors and recipients (Tritto 2021). But we need to pay attention to the fact that many state-led authoritarian tools that end up depriving ordinary people of privacy, agency and voice are also present in China's overseas investments. China exports facial-recognition technologies, drones and other potentially intrusive tools in the name of environmental protection and win-win green development.

In Part I, Julia Gurol and Benjamin Schuetze's contribution on the China–Gulf States relationship underlines this trend. As they note in their article on China's partnerships with authoritarian countries in the Arab world, such relationships are comfortable for China. Oftentimes, Chinese investors partner with more or less authoritarian recipient countries such as Serbia or Venezuela, thinking that government support is sufficient for success. They then discover that local people are incensed because the project is a violation of their rights. Environmental Impact Assessments are flawed, indigenous communities have not been consulted or given their consent, and landscapes are permanently degraded. The project may be litigated. Days or months of work are lost, and there are riots. Often these are weapons of the weak, however, and an emerging literature is exploring the skill with which China uses infrastructure development to co-opt civil society resistance and local culture and legitimise its activities. Of course, problems with projects that go awry on the ground are not unique to Chinese investors. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank and other development agencies have similar track records of supporting megadevelopment projects that destroy communities and degrade ecosystems. China has adopted a surprisingly similar playbook, even as the rhetoric is all about providing alternatives and “win-win green development”.

Chinese officials are often genuinely surprised at grassroots resistance to projects and at anti-Chinese sentiment on the ground. That puzzlement comes from not understanding what would make these projects more sensitive to local concerns and from not obtaining local buy-in. Chinese investors have not had such experiences within China, as they do not need to ask for local

permission when they implement projects at home. When the state decides, it imposes. But in Latin America, for example, laws are emerging about the rights of rivers and the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of indigenous groups. In the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, “pachamama” (Mother Earth) has legal rights – the rights of nature itself. Such political philosophies differ greatly from the Chinese approach, and as of now, China does not have much experience working with governments and citizens’ groups who hold these views.

As John Wilkinson, Ana Saggiaro Garcia and Fabiano Escher argue in Part I, relationships between China and recipients are often more complex than they appear. In the case of Brazil, anti-Chinese sentiment on the part of President Bolsonaro as well as domestic pressures to reduce deforestation have led China to increase its own soy production so as to reduce its perceived dependence on foreign suppliers. To this insight we may add that while China’s global interconnectivity is likely to increase, the “going out” momentum competes with a strong domestic imperative toward self-reliance and a mistrust of the outside world. These competing themes date to the Mao years and even earlier and are likely to continue to play a role as China finds its footing on the international stage.

While Chinese investors face quite a learning curve, a number of intergovernmental agencies, trusted consultants and even Chinese environmental NGOs such as the Global Environment Initiative have been increasingly successful in making the case that strong social and environmental screening mechanisms ultimately make good business sense as a form of risk reduction. Thus, we are gradually seeing shifts in commitments to social and environmental protections on a range of issues, carbon neutrality being the most prominent. The Chinese state, unfortunately, addresses carbon emissions through a technocratic, quantifiable approach, omitting attention to other environmental and social issues. Nuanced considerations such as the value of local cultures or ecosystems need a great deal more sensitivity and do not lend themselves well to targets and top-down solutions, so the Chinese state has a long way to go in these areas.

Despite widespread criticisms of the BRI’s record of natural resource extractivism, labour controversies, financial opaqueness and geopolitical ambitions, especially as the world economy is rattled by Covid, the Xi Jinping administration is nonetheless doubling down on the BRI through a recent, much-expanded programme that it calls the “Global Development Initiative” or GDI (The Economist 2022). While much about the GDI remains in an incipient stage, a picture is emerging that valorises hard infrastructure, material wealth and technological dominance, all of which are framed as manifestations of a “Chinese wisdom” that is at odds with supposedly Western-centric ideas of human flourishing, inclusiveness and tolerance (CIKD 2022).

Lessons for the future

Climate change is often an indirect driver of instability, scarcity and suffering. Those who suffer most are not always well placed to understand the underlying causes of the typhoons, floods, droughts, fires, diseases, insect infestations and changes in crop production that are produced by the overall rise in global temperatures. While governments may be angry and impatient with one another for not doing enough on climate, the real victims are ordinary people whose leaders have failed them. Yet in China, if anything, the state is doing “too much”, in the wrong directions, as we see even more clearly in developments over the past few years. This is causing a loss of citizen confidence in the state, after quite a few years of growing national pride in the rise of China on the global stage and widespread support for Xi Jinping. President Xi’s “green” discourse, and the generally robust economy that has brought China prosperity and super-power status, as well as steps toward cleaning up corruption and pollution, have made him generally popular. In recent years of reduced freedoms and tightened surveillance, however, the rule of the Communist Party has been discredited. As the Party demonstrates its lack of trust in their own people, many Chinese citizens become alienated, bitter and scornful.

In some ways, the increasingly vocal support for China’s hoped-for climate leadership among international observers in the policy and scholarly worlds makes little sense. The country’s recent history has been marked by prolonged coal-fuelled hazes, polluted waterways, contaminated farmlands, desertified landscapes, declining biodiversity, overlogged forests and overfished seas. But the Party’s legitimacy rests in part on its ability to provide increasingly wealthy citizens with clean air and water as well as food that is safe to eat, and in the past few years the Chinese state has been taking aggressive steps to make improvements in these areas. Moreover, carbon mitigation is an increasingly urgent domestic security imperative in the face of rising seas, melting glaciers and extreme weather. Given that China’s ability to curb its massive carbon emissions both within the country and overseas will likely determine whether global warming will be catastrophic, it is understandable, indeed necessary, to continue to focus on China with both hope and fear.

From the perspective of the Chinese state, the environmental path to global leadership is only one of many. Others include creating new financial instruments and lending institutions, repositioning China’s role in such long-established bodies as the WTO, WHO and even the International Olympic Committee, and insisting on China’s seat at the table in such far-flung enterprises as the Arctic Council. But the environmental path remains attractive, if unclear. Despite recent economic setbacks, China remains eager to fill the void now that the United States has retreated from environmental leadership, but they do not see clearly how

to become that leader. There is an apparently sincere expression of hurt whenever Chinese state capital-funded projects are met with local resistance. Chinese state actors need to think about the problems they are encountering more seriously if they hope to achieve true ecological civilisation suitable to the challenges of the 21st century.

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