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Eco-civilisation and Reformed Communism in a Contested G-One World

Dan Smyer Yü

Abstract

This article offers an ideological examination of China's ecological civilisation initiative with respect to its globalisation agenda. The basic argument is that the Chinese state's eco-civilisation project is an open-ended, statist technocratic bricolage that appropriates a philosophy of human-nature harmony and facilitates a reformed communism intended to enchant both domestic and global audiences with a set of human universal values. The article considers eco-civilisation to be technically devised as an attractive initiative packed with the Chinese state's propagated universal values without a specific manual of operations. It is a one-size-fits-all concept but provides enough room for creative tailoring under specific circumstances in different geographical, cultural, economic and political contexts. In the course of delivering this argument, the article discusses how eco-civilisation is domestically and internationally promoted and how it is an inherent part of the renewed but reformed communism of the Chinese state.

Keywords: China, ecological civilisation, geopolitics, value, environmental governance, Two Mountains theory

In ecology, a science of multispecies relations, humans are understood as just one of many biological species on earth. When ecology is linked with civilisation, an exclusively human-centric concept, to produce the neologism “ecological civilisation” it inevitably raises the question of how the inclusivity of a multispecies worldview and the exclusivity of human political and economic development can work together comfortably. The word “civilisation” carries heavy loads of the histories of human empires, their exploitative relations with the earth, and their standardisation of diverse local and regional political systems into a singular order. In its historical process, it has produced derivative lexical meanings pertaining to value-based, linear progress from one stage to another and to comfort and convenience envired in the ethos and the material abundance of a given empire or a modern state.

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Commonly, those who are territorially, racially or politically considered to be out of the civilisational sphere are often deemed “primitive” and, therefore, uncivilised (Comaroff / Comaroff 1991: 218). Needless to say, civilisation and empire are intimately intertwined in what Prasenjit Duara calls “circulatory histories” (Duara 2015: 53). Continental empires and dynasties were often the harbingers of their civilisational values and ideologies, such as when Christianity propagated in Europe via the Roman Empire and Confucianism/Neo-Confucianism spread from Chinese dynasties to their sphere of influence in Northeast and Southeast Asia (Fredriksen 2006: 587–606, Harrell 1995: 3–36).

Ecologically, many of the agriculture-based, imperial economic systems were the anthropogenic forces that converted multispecies habitats into lands exclusively for human use, inducing the transition from nonfossil fuel to fossil fuel, and laid the foundation of the Industrial Revolution that marked the advent of the Anthropocene (Cruzen / Stoermer 2000), the current geological cycle of the earth forged by human environmentally unsustainable activities. Historical civilisations of continental scale inevitably impress us with their ecological hostility as the price of technological advancement and material abundance (Crosby 2004). Of course, if civilisation is now understood as a body of innovative values and actionable visions toward a sustainable future cornucopia, it is only fair to hear what an ecological civilisation can do to navigate the currently colossally stressed world of nations out of environmental and health crises, and away from the accelerated clashes of economic and military superpowers in the arenas of international trade, post-cold war arms race, regional security and the disorderly competition for a new world order.

I write this article to provide an ideological examination of the ecological civilisation initiative (hereafter eco-civilisation) from the Chinese state regarding its globalisation agenda. My basic argument is that the Chinese state’s eco-civilisation project is an open-ended, statist technocratic bricolage that appropriates a philosophy of human–nature harmony and facilitates a reformed communism in euphemistic terms intended to enchant both domestic and global audiences with a set of human universal values. Like the notion of sustainable development initiated by the United Nations in 1987 (Brundtland 1987), eco-civilisation is technically devised as an attractive initiative packed with the Chinese state’s propagated universal values without a specific manual of operations. It is one-size-fits-all initiative but provides enough room for creative tailoring under specific circumstances in different geographical, cultural, economic and political contexts. Geostrategically, it is a global governmentality of the Chinese state enacted through its membership in intergovernmental organisations, promoted through bilateral and multilateral international relations, and showcased in China’s global economic and humanitarian projects. In the course of delivering this argument, I start with the global context of this article and move toward the discussions of how eco-civilisation is domestically and inter-

nationally promoted and how it is an inherent part of the renewed but reformed communism of the Chinese state.

Contextualising China's eco-civilisation in a G-One world

In 2011, Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini (2011) proclaimed that “we are now living in a G-Zero world, one in which no single country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage – or the will – to drive a truly international agenda” (Bremmer / Roubini 2011: 1). In 2012, Bremmer revised the G-Zero world as “a world order in which no single country or durable alliance of countries can meet the challenges of global leadership” (Bremmer 2012: 1). Apparently, the G-Zero world order looks like disorder, without effective order-keeping leadership and instruments. However, it may be surprising to Bremmer that many Chinese patriots in both elite and popular social constituencies of contemporary China perceive the current state of global affairs rather as a G-One world or a unipolar world dominated by the United States but being contested (Wang / Tang 2000, Zhou 2017). Of course, this collective perception rests upon the regional and global issues immediately pertinent to China's national interests and global future, such as Sino-US geostrategic competition, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the conflicts around Taiwan, the Southern China Sea and the Korean peninsula. It fundamentally considers the US as the ultimate source of China's frustrated national integrity and global freedom.

Recalling his “awe-inspiring experience” of walking on the deck of the Carl Vinson, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier of the US Navy, in the South China Sea, David Shambaugh deems the supercarrier “a potent reminder of America's unrivaled military power – which has been projected throughout East Asia and the western Pacific for more than seven decades” (Shambaugh 2021a: xiii-xiv). Shambaugh's geopolitical vista from the deck of the supercarrier inadvertently attests to the G-One world order perceived by the Chinese patriots mentioned above. Appearing prolifically as the topic of “China going global”, the China in Shambaugh's texts is a seventy-two-year-old People's Republic of China, whose global track record is said to have begun in the 1980s after the normalisation of the Sino-US relations and the commencement of China's economic reform (Shambaugh 2020: 14). It is thus assumed by Shambaugh that this young China was isolated and, therefore, nonglobal.

If I take a revisionist approach to recent history, China was indeed contained by the US Navy; however, it globally counteracted the United States and its European allies by building geopolitical cooperation with the Global South throughout the Cold War era. It was excluded from the membership of the Global North but forged a global community of its allies and supporters in Asia, Africa and South America – the regions concentrated with the so-called

“Third World countries”. Maoism and foreign aid packages were directed to these regions as China’s nonprofit global venture in the decades of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Now, this Cold War geopolitical legacy of China’s South-South outreach has been transformed into China’s geo-economic strengths in competing with the US-dominated West. The enactment of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in these continents, for instance, demonstrates the PRC’s ongoing global outreach to the Global South but with a new, super-economic and ideological orientation.

To continue this revisionist perspective a little further, this seventy-two-year-old China had multiple previous lifetimes in a cultural and territorial sense. Immediately relevant to this article, its previous incarnations, such as the Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, were inter-Asian or continental empires, not mono-ethnolinguistic societies, with recorded histories of transregional trade and military conquests. The presence of the past is an inherent part of the PRC. In particular, the current republic emphasises the historical territories of the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing Dynasties as the basis of its sovereign territorial claim. Therefore, the past imperialism is reincarnated in a modern republic. This is not a unique historical process but is also found elsewhere in the world. China’s current globality displays the presence of its past and projects its future, especially as demonstrated in its Belt and Road Initiative as a New Silk Road project in Eurasia.

By adding these revisionist historical perspectives to the globalisation of China discerned in Shambaugh’s work, I see two concurrent patterns of China’s current globality. On the one hand, it is actively pushing the limits of and transforming the US-dominated world order into a multipolar world order (Qi 2019). On the other hand, it is weaving together its own non-Western-oriented global network with the Global South and with nations that are shopping for new trade partners and geopolitical alternatives to the West. Both are contributing to tipping the US-centred world order toward what Bremmer calls the G-Zero world.

In this global context, I state my understanding of eco-civilisation as an integral part of China’s projected global leadership for a multipolar world order. As it weighs more on the political side than on the ecological side, I treat eco-civilisation as a state political ecology or an ecology without ecology but with a plenitude of human-centred political and economic visions mutually shared with other state projects. By “an ecology without ecology”, I mean the secondary and tertiary presence or sometimes complete absence of the physical environment, animals and plants in many official documents and research publications concerning eco-civilisation. When I deem eco-civilisation a global political ecology of the Chinese state, it is fundamentally a political conceptualisation of environmental governance and economic conversion of ecological resources. It is not congruent with the common understanding of political ecology

predicated “on an ecologically conceptualized view of politics” (Peet et al. 2011: 23), in which ecology takes precedence for the sake of environmental justice and human wellbeing. In this sense, eco-civilisation can be understood as the global environmental governmentality of the Chinese state, unavoidably manifested as a technocratically-conceived civilising project. It is designed to trend with the UN sustainable development goals, green transition and renewable energy use, to be driven by growth-based national economies, and to be embedded with the intent of propagating state ideology as a set of human universal values for a new world order in the making.

The conception of a statist civilising project

The late agricultural scientist Ye Qianji (1909–2017) initially coined the phrase *shengtai wenming* or eco-civilisation in his conference paper “Ecological Needs and the Construction of Ecological Civilisation,” presented at the National Symposium of Ecological Agriculture in 1987 (Ministry of Ecology and Environment 2012). He offered a brief but widely cited definition:

So-called eco-civilisation means that humans and nature mutually benefit from each other. While changing [benefitting from] nature, humans protect nature; therefore, humans and nature keep a harmonious relationship. (Xu 2010: 39)

Ye’s coinage is often regarded as the source of the intellectual conceptual development of eco-civilisation as opposed to the state’s political appropriation and expansion of it (Marinelli 2018: 372). In my understanding, Ye’s conference paper was an integral part of the PRC’s nation-building process, as his agricultural science was conscientiously applied toward building a modernised China. His proposal for the construction of ecological civilisation was situated in the greater context of Deng Xiaoping’s nationwide promotion of what is known as “the two civilisations” throughout the decade of the 1980s, namely the “socialist spiritual civilisation” and “socialist material civilisation”. The former refers to communist belief, while the latter to the modernised material basis of a socialist society (Deng 1993: 28). The ideologically-connoted notion of civilisation has actually permeated both state media and the popular realm since the Deng era. It is thus reasonable to discern the construction of eco-civilisation, as occurring initially in Ye’s paper and currently in all social realms of the contemporary China, as a socialist state civilising project.

Although Ye’s coinage of eco-civilisation discernibly maintained the ideological value of the “two civilisations”, it was nevertheless narrowly limited within the sphere of China’s agricultural science. It was twenty years later when Hu Jintao, the third post-Mao president of China, made it as a national buzzword in his address to the Seventeenth National Congress in 2007. He and his

successor Xi Jinping take the credit for China's national and international promotion of eco-civilisation as a worldwide civilising project of China. For an effective understanding of eco-civilisation as a state project, I find relevant Shambaugh's leadership-biographical approach to China's domestic and geopolitical policy-making when he suggests the need "to explore the intersection between each individual's persona and style of rule with China's developments domestically and internationally" (Shambaugh 2021b: 26).

Hu's ten-year presidency from 2002–2012 coincided with the Chinese state's more serious consideration of the UN's proposal for sustainable development, which had been introduced into China but not yet practiced. The sustained annual 10 per cent economic growth of China from the 1990s to the 2000s reflected the environmentally unsustainable development period. Hu's address to the Seventeenth National Congress marked the official connection of eco-civilisation with sustainable development:

Building ecological civilisation, in essence, is building a resource-efficient and environmentally friendly society that is based on the carrying capacity of resources and the environment, complies with natural laws and aims at sustainable development. (Pan 2016: 29)

However, Hu did not offer a clear delineation of what eco-civilisation is about except a set of growth-based principles to balance economic development and environmental sustainability. Hu's eco-civilising leadership style fits Shambaugh's characterisation of him as "a technocratic apparatchik" (Shambaugh 2021b: 26). This is where I start discerning eco-civilisation as a state political ecology that had not actually previously contained ecological elements.

In the intervening years, eco-civilisation has evolved into a double-purposed instrument for practicing the slippery idea of sustainable development and channeling China's experiences of it into the international arena of economic development. By "slippery", I mean that the UN's well-intended notion of sustainable development has not yet proven itself successful, given the fact that the environment of the earth has instead become increasingly less sustainable since the concept's inception. It is worded with enough environmental ambiguity to permit either the economic sustainability of growth-based development or the prerequisite of environmental sustainability for economic development. Thus far, the former has been well in evidence while the latter continues to cry out for actual sustainable actions worldwide. Hu's euphemistic appropriation of the UN's ambiguously defined concept of sustainable development empowered the public relations necessary for the internationalisation of eco-civilisation for the years to come.

When Xi Jinping became the president of China in 2012, he inherited Hu's inchoate foundation of eco-civilisation but began his own creative ways of propagating it worldwide. Shambaugh's characterisation of Xi in his leadership style as "a modern emperor" (Shambaugh 2021b: 26) appears to be more a value-judgment than an analytical expediency. I will substantiate what I mean

by “value judgement” toward the end of this article. Given the centralised political system of the PRC, anyone in its leadership could be seen as an emperor. Since Shambaugh evokes the Weberian typology of political authority – charismatic, traditional and legal-rational (Shambaugh 2021b: 30) – I lean toward characterising Xi as the second charismatic leader in contemporary China, after Mao, based on my work and daily living experiences inside the country and on my routine browsing of a wide range of Chinese-language social media. The solidification and growth of Xi’s political charisma is often event-based, in the examples of pushing back against what the Chinese state perceives as US aggression in the Sino-US trade conflict, the launching of China’s two self-made aircraft carriers Shandong and Fujian respectively in 2017 and 2022, the completion of the Tiangong Space Station in 2021 and the eighteen sorties of Y-20 transporters delivering military supplies to Serbia in the span of a week in spring 2022. Xi’s leadership currently has millions of the “Young Red Fans” (*xiaofenhong*; Yu 2021, VOA 2021). The pattern of Xi’s growing charisma is centred on the growing patriotism in Chinese society expressed through the national reaction to the contested G-One world order and the popular support for a multipolar world in which China is expected to take a co-leading position.

In the arena of eco-civilisation, Xi’s public discourse is much more colloquial and, therefore, accessible than Hu’s. Xi’s metaphor for ecological civilisation is known as the “Two Mountains” theory (*Liangshan lilun*), in which the physical environment is metaphorised as either “green mountains” or “gold mountains” or both. The former refers to the natural state of the land in the forms of wooded hills and water-rich earth, while the latter means the economic value of the environment as the source of natural resources. His metaphoric style is rooted in his youth and his currently continued affinity with rural China. Because his father was persecuted by the far-left of the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution, Xi was involuntarily sent to a village in Yanchuan County, Shanxi Province, for “re-education” in 1969 at the age of fifteen. In his biographical article “I’m a Son of this Yellow Earth”, a popular read inside China, he writes:

At the age of fifteen when I arrived at this yellow earth [the Loess Plateau], I was lonely and confused. At the age of twenty-two when I was leaving it, I had a solid life goal filled with confidence. As a civil servant, the Loess Plateau is my root because it nurtured me with an unshakable faith to serve the people! (Xi 2002: 110)

His personable approach to the Chinese public is winning a growing number of young patriots in China. Bearing his biographical signature, the Two Mountains theory was conceived when Xi was the governor of Zhejiang Province, a province known for its green hills and scenic river landscapes. In 2005, he visited a village in the hills of Anji County, to receive the village’s report on their livelihood transition from a mining economy (heavy metal mine in the hills) to a tourist economy relying on the surrounding natural beauty and human

cultural heritage. After the report, Xi remarked, “We often say we want green mountains and clean water as well as gold and silver mountains [economic returns]. In fact, green mountains and clean water are gold and silver mountains” (Xia 2015). A few days later, Xi wrote an article titled “Green Mountains are Gold Mountains” (Xi 2005), published in a provincial newspaper, formally proposing the Two Mountains theory. The commonly understood thesis of Xi’s perspective is that “if the ecological advantage of a place could be translated into ecologically-friendly agriculture, industries, and tourism, its green mountains and clean water naturally become gold and silver mountains” (Wang et al. 2017: 2). When the Two Mountains theory was officially incorporated into the policy implementation of China’s sustainable development and eco-civilisation in 2015, it began to enter an era of formal feasibility studies and public discussions on how to balance environmental conservation with the economic use of natural resources.

Situated in the context of China’s pursuit of environmentally-friendly but growth-based development, the relationship between green mountains and gold mountains is currently being rigorously studied and debated in China regarding the meanings of sustainable development framed in eco-civilisation. The debates are centred on the question of how ecological values are converted into economic values and vice versa. Currently, there are three options for the ecology-economy relationship discerned among scholars based in China (Wang et al. 2017: 3–4, Zhuang / Ding 2020: 26–27). These are: 1) to trade green mountains for gold mountains – sacrificing the environment, e.g. mining and felling forests, for full-scale economic gains; 2) to keep both green and gold mountains – balancing the integrity of the environment and the economic desires; 3) to see the synonymy of green and gold mountains – green mountains are gold mountains when their unique ecological values are discovered.

When the Two Mountains theory is applied as the principle of eco-civilisation, the second and the third variants of the relationship are the goals to be pursued, although China’s environmental track record attests to the first set. Inside China, the theory is being practiced through the state’s centralised environmental management, implemented in environmental laws, hailed as the environmental guidance toward the common good of humankind and nature (Ke et al. 2018: 4). At the same time, the theory adds Xi’s distinct biographical characteristic to the internationalisation of eco-civilisation. After all, the application of the Two Mountains theory in eco-civilisation is a governmental affair rather than an environmental movement in which common citizens have an active voice.

Divergent global feedback

China's global promotion of eco-civilisation through intergovernmental organisations appears to be successful. The UN Environmental Program (UNEP) has welcomed it as an “innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development” (UNEP 2016: 3). Its latest positive remark comes from Neville Ash, director of UNEP-WCMC:

Ecological Civilization not only reflects the essential role that nature plays in underpinning people's lives but also the need to improve our relationship with nature in all areas, from the way we govern to the way we produce and consume goods around the world. (UNEP 2019)

However, both positive and negative assessments in the academic world are concurrently ongoing among scholars. Since the inauguration of Xi's presidency in 2012, the environmental policy outcome of the PRC has often been deemed “authoritarian environmentalism” (Gilley 2012) and “coercive environmentalism” (Li / Shapiro 2020). The two terms are synonymous. Coined by Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro (2020), the latter characterises Xi's ecological civilisation and proposition for green development as an “environmental fix in action” with both global and domestic implications. On the one hand, “through the exercise of coercive environmentalism, China is affixing manifestations of state power on the surface of the planet” and, on the other hand, the authors continue:

coercive environmentalism also constitutes a metaphorical fix for the authoritarian state. The green initiatives at home help state power penetrate into the everyday lives of citizens, from the industrial East to the borderlands. (Li / Shapiro 2020: 190)

This negative assessment of China's sustainable development is based on the poor environmental track records of the PRC since its inception over seventy years ago as well as on the authors' understanding of the Chinese state as an authoritarian state.

Equally critical but without political labelling, based on their research, Mette Halskov Hansen and her co-authors assert that the official documents and promotional literature from the Chinese state provide

no basis for claiming that eco-civilisation is likely to result in profoundly new practices of, for instance, resource extraction, investments, or redistribution of resources [...] it largely ignores the environmental risks involved in continued global growth dependency. (Hansen et al. 2018: 203)

While praising China's signing of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, Richard Stáhel also makes a factual statement: “China is the world's largest polluter” (Stáhel 2020: 166). Likewise, Jean-Yves Heurtebise acknowledges that China's ecological civilisation is ideologically valuable for the Chinese state but he also recognises its prioritisation of “growth over rights in the name of national sovereignty”, which “leads to poor environmental performance” (Heurtebise 2017: 11).

Regarding the environmental track record of the PRC since its founding, the assessments of Hansen, St'ahel and Heurtebise are similar to their scholarly counterparts based in China. Wang Zhihe, a proponent of eco-civilisation, points out that “half a million die each year because of air pollution” and China is a “pollution haven” (Wang et al. 2014). In his effort to substantiate eco-civilisation as not merely “empty propaganda”, Pan Jiahua, secretary general and director of Sustainable Development Research Center at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), acknowledges the “damages to natural environment, soil and water erosion, resource degradation, and ecosystem imbalances” (Pan 2016: 36) caused by China’s industrialisation and modernisation projects in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, Pan Yue, the former Vice Minister of Environmental Protection acknowledged:

While becoming the world leader in GDP growth and foreign investment, we have also become the world’s number one consumer of coal, oil and steel – and the largest producer of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) and chemical oxygen demand (COD) emissions. (Pan 2006)

Based on these commonly recognised environmental consequences of China’s modernisation path, it is reasonable to say that the eco-civilisation initiative is more akin to damage control or an environmental restoration attempt rather than a forward-thinking, substantiated and actionable practice that is preparing China to be an “environmental leader of the world” (Kassiola 2013: xvii).

In spite of the research-based critical feedback, the Chinese state presents eco-civilisation as a forward-thinking, global environmental policy instrument widely promoted through the UN. Pan Jiahua proclaims, “China is entering the new era of building an ecological civilisation. Ecological civilisation as a new paradigm for green economy requires experimentation in practice and academic research” (Pan 2016: xii). In his view, this new paradigm is being promoted as a traditional cosmology of “harmony between human and nature” in a modern guise. It admittedly attracts international proponents, particularly from the fields of religion and ecology, as well as eco-Marxism. Known for his work on Confucianism and ecology, Tu Weiming regards the timing and importance of eco-civilisation as “a new Axial Age” (Tu 2013), commensurate with Karl Jasper’s conception of the era between the eighth and the third century BCE that saw the emergence of Eurasian thinkers such as Heraclitus, Plato, Zarathustra, Shakyamuni, Confucius and Laotzu. Matching Tu’s high acclaim but situated in the eco-Marxist perspective, Roy Morrison lauds the emergence of eco-civilisation as “an epochal transition” toward “a new civilisation” (Morrison 2013); Arran Gare considers it “a new vision” with “radical implications” (Gare 2017: 13, 2012: 21); and David Korten eulogises it as “the New Enlightenment” (Korten 2017: 17).

In addition to Tu’s positive appraisal from the perspective of religion and ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim offered their impression of Pan

Yue as someone “who has studied these [Chinese religious] traditions and sees them as critical to Chinese environmental ethics” (Tucker / Grim 2017: 10) and, therefore, as someone who holds the knowledge of “the harmonious unity of man and nature” (Pan 2011) found in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Pan’s appropriation of the human–nature harmony concepts from Asian religious traditions is persuasive enough for James Miller to qualify eco-civilisation as “a new cultural whole” (Miller 2013: 143). As a traditional eco-philosophical idea, *tianren heyi* (天人合一) or the “unity of human nature” is frequently referenced to support the conceptual foundation of eco-civilisation among many scholars and policy specialists inside and outside China (Bao 2014, Lü 2021). It is discerned as “the essence of ancient Chinese philosophy on ecological civilisation” (Pan 2016: x), as “the root of life” (Yuan 2017: 4), and as “the cultural gene for green development” (Lin et al. 2020: 44). However, the philosophical support borrowed from religious traditions does not free eco-civilisation from its impression of being generic and ambiguous. While recognising its vagueness, John Cobb Jr., a renowned Christian theologian and a proponent of eco-civilisation, notes that “China’s official goal of ecological civilisation could become the global goal” (Cobb Jr. / Vltchek 2019: 55).

Given the atheist state ideology, it is reasonable to point out that religious ecology was not initially intended by the Chinese leaders. Apparently, the Chinese state’s coinage of eco-civilisation has sparked prominent religious ecologists to recognise ancient eco-civilisations that long existed before the birth of their modern counterpart; however, they do not make a clear distinction between traditional ecological knowledge and the current growth-based design of eco-civilisation.

In principle, eco-Marxists from Western countries would be the natural allies of Chinese eco-civilisation, as many of their research publications have been translated into Chinese, including James O’Connor’s *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (1998) and John Bellamy Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (2000). However, eco-Marxism is visibly marginalised in the Chinese statist environmental discourse. Its instrumentality is acknowledged as a means to fight capitalism in the West rather than as an additional building block of eco-civilisation in China. For instance, Pan Jiahua limits his discussion of eco-Marxism within “the capitalist system”, which is deemed “the origin of ecological crisis” (Pan 2016: 32). Pan’s distancing from Western eco-Marxists suggests that capitalism rather than socialism is the cause of the worldwide environmental crisis and, therefore, that eco-Marxist critique is not relevant to socialist China. This official perspective is echoed among the scholarly enthusiasts of eco-Marxism based in China; as Wang Zhihe and his colleagues point out, “Chinese ecological Marxists are using [Western] ecological Marxism only to criticize foreign capitalist countries” (Wang et al. 2014). It is thus not surprising that Western eco-Marxism receives a marginal welcome.

The suspicion is mutual. Leading eco-Marxist scholars based in the West are critical of China's eco-civilisation. In his plenary address to the World Cultural Forum held in Hangzhou, China in 2013, while emphasising China as a potential global "green leader," Roy Morrison remarked that "the Chinese model is a startling amalgam of the most effective growth at any cost measures drawn from the worst of capitalist and totalitarian socialist industrial practice" (Morrison 2013). Likewise, John Bellamy Foster reminds his readers that "China's environmental problems are massive and growing" (Foster 2015). While eco-Marxists and Chinese ecological civilisers share Marxist roots, they are apparently not ready to accept each other as comrades in both environmental and political senses. Environmentally, eco-Marxists prefer a radical slowdown of resource extraction and consumption, and advocate human rights and environmental justice; whereas ecological civilisers in China would like to continue with their GDP-based economic growth but turn this high-percentage growth into environmentally friendly "green development", however that might be conceived. Politically, eco-Marxism and ecological civilisation have emerged from two diametrically opposed social systems, namely the Western democratic system and the Chinese centralised system. The Western democratic system affords a politically tolerant society that makes the emergence of eco-Marxism possible in spite of its opposition and hostility to the capitalist system. The Chinese centralised system provides top-down solutions to all national issues including environmental problems. Fundamentally, it is not their Marxist denominational differences that set eco-Marxism and eco-civilisation apart; instead, it is the Western-derived acceptance of civil liberty found in eco-Marxism that poses destabilising threats to the centralised governing system of China.

The ideological drive of eco-civilisation

The diverse international scholars' responses have limited impact on China's domestic environmental policy-making process and the globalisation of eco-civilisation. The global sound bite of eco-civilisation mostly comes from the UN as its primary promotional site. Since 2016, the UN's introduction of eco-civilisation has added a Xi characteristic, namely the Two Mountains theory. The publication *Green is Gold: The Strategy and Actions of China's Ecological Civilization* (UNEP 2016) enthusiastically promotes eco-civilisation as a Chinese model of environmental management and protection in a future tense, in terms of what it can and will accomplish for the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and beyond. For its 2020 biodiversity conference held in Kunming, China, the UN continued to endorse Xi's vision by designating "Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth" as its theme. Eco-civilisation has

been warmly and successfully ushered into UN's global community, in which China is being lauded as a global environmental leader. Recognisably, China is an active contributor to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and has committed itself to tackling climate change under the terms of the Paris Agreement.

Immediately relevant to the ideological inquiry of this article, the wording of the UN 2020 biodiversity conference theme shows a direct linkage of eco-civilisation with what I call a reformed communist ideology expressed as human universals in seemingly non-communist terms. The subtitle "Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth" is discernibly a slight revision of the CCP's newest global ideological mission, officially phrased as "building the community of a shared future for mankind [构建人类命运共同体]" (hereafter "shared future"; Xi 2018). This phrase was written into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China respectively in 2017 and 2018. It has now become the fresh ideological framework for promoting China's global leadership. This is where I argue that, in addition to its environmental and economic development objectives, the globalisation of eco-civilisation is simultaneously driven by and facilitates a reformed communism euphemised as a project of building the shared future for humankind.

In the last three years, eco-civilisation has rapidly dovetailed with the "shared future" initiative. In delivering his keynote speech at a conference in 2018, Pan Yue announced:

Ecological civilisation will be an integral part of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind. This is the unique contribution from Xi Jinping's ecological thought to contemporary China and global civilisation. (Pan 2018)

According to the ongoing expositions from state-sanctioned research in China, the notion of a "shared future", which might be better translated as "common future", consists of the practical guidance and ideological foundation of the CCP based upon Marxism and Leninism. The practical guidance consists of building common ground with the international community in the arenas of economic development, global responsibilities and universal values that transcend nation, ethnicity and worldviews (Zhang / Duan 2017: 64). The ideological foundation refers to Marx's notion of the "real community" in contrast to the "illusory community" (Marx / Engels 1970: 83). According to Chinese Marxist scholars, the difference between the "real" and the "illusory" is the diametrical opposition between communism and capitalism (Qiao 2019: 22). The former is self-proclaimed to be real, while the latter is deemed illusory. Thus, Marx's notion of "real community" is the ideological foundation of the "shared future", which is believed to lead to "the ultimate value" of communism (Li 2018: 137). Therefore, "the realisation of communism is the ultimate goal of the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind'" (Qiao 2019: 24). In dovetailing ecological civilisation and the "shared future" as an innovative Communist vision of the PRC, Chinese Marxist scholars are openly expressing their commonly shared

perspectives: 1) in essence, ecological civilisation can only be socialist because socialism is the social form congruent with ecological civilisation (Zhang 2014); 2) for practical materialists such as Communists, revolutionising the current world is the solution to all problems by working for the antithesis to, or transforming, the current state of affairs. On this basis, the construction of the proposed ecological civilisation is foremost a developmental revolution (Liu / Tian 2020: 9); 3) ecological civilisation conveys to the world the wisdom and responsibility of Chinese Communism (Li 2018: 14).

This trend of dovetailing eco-civilisation with reformed communism, which has been taking place in the Chinese language media inside China for the last five years, is rarely questioned: “Is Green the New Red?” (Imbach 2020). Environmentally and economically, the equation of Green = Gold is now globally known, but not of Green = Red as an ideological equation. The New Red embedded in eco-civilisation is the reformed communism, by which I mean a creative system capable of public image-shifting aimed at the resilience, preservation and propagation of communism with Chinese characteristics. While the essence of communism remains the same, its expressions and representations are being adapted to the globally accepted lingua franca of human universals. It has undergone a transformation from what I call an “infrared phase” to an “open phase”. The former refers to the decades of the 1980s through the 2000s, during which the Chinese Communist Party often downplayed its ideological doctrines in the global public sphere (Shambaugh 2020: 17). The latter refers to the 2010s, when the Chinese Communist Party began to openly promote communist values in both domestic and international spheres. In this sense, reformed communism is a reinvigorated communism complexly saturating the public domain, inter-governmental organisations and the business world.

Post-Communist-minded scholars may contend with my argument by insisting on contemporary China as a post-Communist state because of its globally known market economy. It is indeed irrefutable that the Chinese economy is an integral part of the global economy upheld by the West; however, it is equally irrefutable that the Chinese Communist Party wishes to sustain the current socialist system and the communist ideology. The geographically-correct designation of the phrase post-Communism is Europe, which is marked by the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Both events engendered a global perception of the departure of communism. However, this is not the case with China and East Asia in general. While the former Soviet Union was ideologically and territorially shattered, the PRC has grown economically and militarily stronger and, territorially, it regained sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau. From the neoliberal perspective, the capitalist investments from the West were supposed to transform the communist state into a democratic nation with a familiar Western, election-based political system; instead, China is now transforming the world with its creative economic

and geopolitical projects, ideologically guided by its reformed communism. The Chinese state's ideological creativity clearly demonstrates an ability to invent metaphors and euphemisms that allow its reformed communism to shapeshift itself in globally accepted human universals. Eco-civilisation, or rather the ecological civilising project, is an integral part of the Chinese state's ideological teleology.

Conclusion

Ecology, as a science, is an integral part of humanity's long-standing drive to better understand how we are physically surrounded by and interact with the earth in both biological and cultural terms. It is a product of human civilisation. If we look into the Earth's ecosphere beyond the existence of *Homo sapiens* in the last 200,000 years, the earth is unimaginably more ancient than humankind, and has an "ecological civilisation" of its own, as evidenced in its self-regulated geophysiology (Margulis 1998: 114). However, the course of the imperial-scale human civilisations in different parts of the world has been a process of what I would call the "humanisation of the earth" in terms of our extractive relations with nature through intensive farming, pastoralism and industrial mining.

"Humanisation" in this regard perceptually conveys a sense of owning and physically overwhelming the earth's own geophysiological agency. The Anthropocene hypothesis conceived at the turn of the twenty-first century is the extreme point of the humanisation of the earth on a geological scale. Given the anthropogenic condition and the state ideology of contemporary China, it is reasonable to see China's eco-civilisation as an initiative of ecological restitution on the one hand, and as an instrument of propagating the Chinese state's own universal values drawn from its reformed communism. Thus, it inevitably falls under the spotlight of geopolitical and value debates.

The portrayal of the international community and the current world order in the texts of Shambaugh and Bremmer suggests the US-EU centredness of world affairs. The alliance of the United States and the European Union is undoubtedly the economic engine of the world. From the perspective of the Global South or developing countries, the ending of the bipolar world order of the Cold War in early 1990s was the starting point of the unipolar world order that has been challenged but maintained. The presence of the US military superpower in all oceans and continents suggests the physical force maintaining the order of a G-One world.

The democratic values of the West have been equally powerful in transforming the political landscapes of individual nations but are currently encountering both

domestic and international challenges in the arenas of national elections, the social ethics and responsibilities of the IT giants, and the debates of human rights vs. the right to subsistence. China, as the second largest economy on earth, is not merely a global factory (Smyer Yü 2015: 15) but is also an agent of change with its own production of human universal values. Framed in the reformed communist global initiative for “Building the Community of Shared Future for Mankind” and spread through UN agencies and projects, eco-civilisation is indisputably a civilising project. In principle, it is a restitutive project that cleans up the polluted environments and recovers environmental health from the extractive practice of economic development. In practice, it promulgates the values of the Chinese state, which the West opposes.

Earlier, when I said that Shambaugh’s characterisation of Xi as a modern emperor appears to be a value judgment, I meant to point out a head-on collision of two value-systems. Shambaugh’s image of “modern emperor” suggests the authoritarian political system of China on the one hand, in contrast to the democratic system of the United States and its Western allies on the other hand. This value-collision frequently occurs in the diplomatic diatribes in Sino-US and Sino-EU relations. Western politicians unprecedentedly express concerns about China’s challenge to the common values they hold, namely civil liberty, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, said in a press release after the 22nd EU-China Summit videoconference in June 2020:

We [the EU and China] do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values. (EU 2020)

His Chinese counterparts, in return, allege the hypocrisy and double-standards of Western democracy in the extradition case of Julian Assange, the treatment of Syrian refugees in Europe and the post-war humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2011–2022). The common hypocrisy from both sides is that they continue to trade with each other while professing their conflicting values. Value in this case bears a twofold ontological meaning. On the one hand, it signifies the ongoing opposing ideological values of China and the West. On the other hand, it points to the common economic value from their international trade and investments. The former ideologically and politically divides them, while the latter irrefutably ties them together in the global economic system. Both sides wish to accept only the universal value of capital while trying to reject each other’s political values. In this midst, China’s eco-civilisation appears to play a role of transcending the ideological differences by strengthening the mutually desirable economic values with an added incentive to promote environmental wellbeing. However, given the future orientation of eco-civilisation as a communist utopia, its ultimate outcomes are not yet known.

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