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Ecological Civilisation
A Historical Perspective on Environmental Policy Narratives in China

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Abstract

This paper engages with China's currently most prominent environmental policy concept: ecological civilisation. As this concept is becoming a cornerstone of China's strategy of socialist modernisation, we examine whether and how the term can enable ecological protection in China and beyond. We argue that ecological civilisation, while a recently emerged discourse, builds on established environmental governance practices in China that shape its manifestation in political action. To illustrate this argument, we explain how two philosophical principles central to ecological civilisation discourse, "holism" and "harmony", have been expressed in environmental political practice in Communist China. Building on this analysis, we suggest that ecological civilisation discourse may have a profound impact in certain policy domains (e.g., resource conservation and ecological conservation redlines), but limited transformative capacity in others (e.g., environmental litigation and resource extraction).

Keywords: China, environmental policy, ecological civilisation, discourse, holism, harmony

Introduction

Among China's many transformations, the shift in the country's international environmental profile is one of the most recent, as well as the one most visible to foreign observers. In 2009, China was portrayed as the party that "wrecked the deal" of the international climate negotiations in Copenhagen (Lynas 2009). Only a few years later, China was seen as central to the successful negotiations that culminated in the Paris Agreement (Dong 2017, Hilton / Kerr 2017). Ten years after Copenhagen, Xi Jinping was applauded by some observers for shouldering a leadership position in international climate agendas by adopting a carbon neutrality target to be reached 2060 (Tooze 2020).

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What does it mean for the world that China is contending for the role of flagbearer of global environmental progress? The shift in geopolitics that underpins this pivot suggests that the implications may be profound. As argued in this Special Issue (see Rodriguez / Tyfield in Part II), we may be standing on the brink of a new era, in which the putative rise of China as a new hegemon challenges institutions that have dominated world politics throughout modern history. Within this reorganisation of authority, global environmental governance constitutes a main arena. China accounts for a rising share of global resource consumption, but is also a leader in the production and use of renewable energy technology (REN21 2021). Through trade and investment flows, China is exerting increasing leverage over infrastructure around the world, as particularly evidenced by the Belt and Road Initiative (Pradhan 2018, Winter 2020). A more subtle form of authority is exercised through the construction of new discourses and norms in international projects and institutions (Salamatin 2020), including in environmental governance (Esarey et al. 2020). This places environmental policy narratives in China in a new light, as their underpinning assumptions and principles may shape possibilities of ecosystem protection both within and beyond the country's borders.

With this new imperative to examine environmental politics in China in mind, we engage with the chief environmental policy concept promoted by the Xi Jinping administration: ecological civilisation. In the report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2017, the principle was framed as an essential component of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Solé-Farràs 2008). The term was first included in China's Constitution in 2018. As is often the case with CPC rhetoric, assessments of ecological civilisation have generated confounding conclusions. On one hand, the narrative is presented as a sign of a deep shift in China's development trajectory (Weiming 2001). According to this perspective, China's political leadership seeks to revive ancient philosophical principles through the concept (Pan 2007, Solé-Farràs 2008).

Traditional thinking in Confucianism, Daoism, and Zen Buddhism views the natural world as interconnected and interdependent with human life, imbued with morality and intrinsic value. For instance, *Qi Wu Lun* ("Uniformity Theory") by Zhuangzi stated: "Heaven and Earth co-exist with me, and all things and I are in oneness" (Guo 1961: 79). Similarly, Zen Buddhism integrates the philosophy of unity of humanity and nature (Song 2004). The principle of unity (Qian 1991, Zhang 1997) represents "a sustainable harmonious relationship between the human species and nature" (Weiming 2001: 253). Interpretations that stress the revival of these values suggest that ecological civilisation carries significant potential to tackle environmental degradation and reimagine socioecological relations.

Others remain sceptical. According to Hansen et al. (2018), ecological civilisation draws on reductionist and selective accounts of Chinese philosophy. It is a cultural signifier rather than a call for radical reform, and it fails to address root causes of environmental destruction, such as global capitalist relations or growth-oriented development (Hansen et al. 2018). From this perspective, ecological civilisation is characterised by a forceful focus on science and technology, with innovation framed as the principal solution to ecological destruction (ibid., Geall / Ely 2018, Hansen / Liu 2018). The claim that Chinese philosophical traditions are environmentalist has been criticised as anachronistic. Pre-industrial thought in other parts of the world could equally be characterised as eco-centric, as many traditional systems of knowledge reflect a deep understanding of the natural world and its interconnections with human life (Heurtebise 2017). These interpretations present the concept as elaborate political greenwash – a cynical attempt by the CPC to infuse environmental programmes with legitimacy by linking them to deeply rooted values.

Our position in this debate is that we cannot assume a direct translation of concepts from ancient Chinese philosophy into contemporary environmental policy. Yet, neither can we dismiss the discourse as an empty political slogan. We suggest instead that ecological civilisation is embedded in a trajectory of environmental governance practices within the Communist Party. Drawing on insights from historical research on environmental politics in China, we argue that ecological civilisation, while a recently emerged discourse, builds on established rationalities that shape its manifestations in political action. These consolidated practices suggest that ecological civilisation discourse may have a profound impact in certain policy domains (e.g., resource conservation and ecological conservation), but limited effect in others (e.g., local environmental litigation and resource extraction).

We illustrate this argument through the following steps. First, we explain the importance of interpreting environmental policy concepts through a historical lens. Second, we discuss the complex connections – ruptures and continuities – that link philosophical ideas in ancient China with contemporary policy discourse. Next, we present a brief overview of the rise of environmentalism in China since 1972, reflecting on how environmental governance practices have been structured according to two principles for action: "holistic" thinking and the maintenance of stability, or "harmony". In Section 5, we examine the potential effects of ecological civilisation discourse through the perspective of these two principles. In conclusion, we suggest that the influence of the concept may be profound within China, but carries limited and uncertain implications for international politics.

Historical perspectives on environmental policy

All forms of environmental political action in the present are, in some way, shaped by events in the past. Historical institutionalism is a theoretical and methodological perspective that captures how historical processes and events produce (political) institutions, which come to structure both the form and content of political decision making (Steinmo 2008). Institutions, in this context, are understood as formal and informal rules that inform and structure social conduct. In a historical institutionalist sense, institutions are never external to political contestation, but represent the "enduring legacies of political struggles" (Thelen 1999). Examples of the conditioning effects of political institutions on social outcomes abound. For instance, the rules of interaction of interest groups shape the structure and operation of social welfare systems (Immergut 1992), while the structure of labour markets affects the organisation of political regimes (Collier / Collier 1991).

Paradoxically, while historical institutionalist analyses explain socio-political change, a central premise is that change is difficult to achieve (Steinmo 2008). There are multiple reasons behind the obduracy of political institutions, including the perceived legitimacy of social rules and the embeddedness of vested interests in existing rule sets (Powell / DiMaggio 2012). This does not imply that individuals or groups are hostages to political institutions, but rather that when rule sets change, this normally occurs slowly and in accordance with cultural understandings. For example, the concept of path dependency, as per historical institutionalist analyses, explains that political institutions develop through pathways that involve critical junctures and long periods of stability and continuity (Ikenberry 1994). Even throughout processes of change, political leaders never design interventions on a blank page; "when policy makers set out to redesign institutions, they are constrained in what they can conceive of by these embedded, cultural constraints" (Thelen 1999: 386).

These insights are well understood in environmental politics research. In environmental policy-making, critical junctures can open up for the deployment of new approaches and instruments (Froger / Méral 2012). However, continuity is a stronger theme than change. For example, analysis of the evolution of environmental policy in the European Union over decades reveals that, despite significant shifts in global socio-environmental conditions, policy change has mainly been incremental, often following entrenched path dependencies (Zito et al. 2019). In cases where new policy strategies are introduced, their realisation can be prevented by existing structures and rationalities of government (Varjú 2021) or by different forms of path dependency within administrations responsible for their implementation (Kirk et al. 2007, Marshall / Alexandra 2016).

A parallel literature explains the relative stability of environmental policy over time through continuities in policy discourse. Environmental policy discourses produce frames of reference, established linguistic tropes and assemblages of ideas that define possible and appropriate forms of political action (Dryzek 2013, Feindt / Oels 2005). Environmental policy discourses are created through contestation between multiple groups and forms of knowledge, and, as they consolidate over time, they often become linked with policy tools or political practices (Hajer 1995). Environmental policy discourses are often resistant to change. When political leaders attempt to shift direction in environmental politics (including through radical pivots), they often instead end up rehashing established approaches by recycling ideas from the dominant discourse (Simoens / Leipold 2021, Wurzel 2010). In a synthesis of studies on environmental policy discourse in the past decades, Leipold et al. (2019: 452) identify a pattern of "persistence or incremental change of discourses (and of connected institutions and policies), often accompanied by policy outcomes that are perceived as being dissatisfactory". As the trend in environmental policy discourses globally follows a pattern of "remarkable continuity" (Leipold et al. 2019), the adoption of new policy narratives in China will likely also reflect established political rationales. To determine whether this is the case, we examine the conceptual building blocks of the ecological civilisation narrative from the perspective of their deployment in environmental governance practices over time.

Ruptures and continuities of environmental thought in communist China

Environmentalism in modern China emerged in parallel with profound social, economic and political change. The evolution of CPC ideology and practice, including the creation and dissolution of links with ecological ethics in Chinese philosophy, relates directly to this history.

Research on environmental policy in the Mao era (1949–1978) demonstrates how connections with the past were severed through explicit attempts to eradicate cultural and social memories. This was a period of deep turbulence, involving political movements (e.g., Destroy the Four Olds) that sought to destroy everything from historical monuments to traditional values. The work of Shapiro (2001) engages with the environmental destruction caused during the reign of Mao. She shows how "Mao's war against nature" left China a dismal environmental legacy, in terms of over-exploitation of resources, deforestation, desertification and severe pollution (cf. Smil 1984). In Shapiro's view, an attitude of opposition to nature and of violence explains the justification

of ecosystem degradation during this time, alongside erosion of social institutions and the discontinuation of sustainable farming practices (ibid.).

The politics of the Mao era, however, were complex and multifaceted. Other scholars have shown that government programmes in the early years of the PRC did involve environmental research and ecological protection, such as water and soil conservation conducted through large-scale planting and plot rotations (Gao / Muscolino 2021). It is also possible to trace continuities in political praxis from this era until the present. For example, faith in technology to deliver social progress was formulated under Mao, as captured in Schmalzer's (2016) account of the interconnection between China's red and green revolutions. Mao portrayed "scientific experiment" as one of the key revolutionary movements to build a socialist nation (Schmalzer 2016). This line of thinking found resonance years later in the Scientific Outlook on Development narrative, promoted by the Hu Jintao Administration, and it continues to permeate the development discourse of China's 14th Five Year Plan (FYP) (NDRC 2021).

Likewise, the Reform and Opening Up period, initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, disrupted socio-political structures and human–nature relations. The widespread ecological destruction that occurred in this period was deeply interconnected with the shift to a capitalist economy. Authority over land use was transferred to local governments and markets, alongside new modes of production, land ownership and livelihoods (Muldavin 2000). These shifts also created new patterns of exclusion, enclosures and extraction. For example, during the 1980s–1990s, the establishment of "township and village enterprises" was encouraged and barely regulated, becoming an economic development strategy that contributed significantly to pollution (Tilt 2009). Rural populations experienced a sharp rise in vulnerability, which contributed to a growing exploitation of ecosystems and neglect of previous communal assets, such as forests and grasslands (Muldavin 2000). Nonetheless, certain environmental governance practices remained intact throughout these years of turbulence. For example, the regional development strategy of the reform era emphasised the strategic upgrading of manufacturing and export capacity in China's coastal region, buffered by the extraction of resources from "peripheral" provinces. This scheme not only bore a resemblance to mechanisms of territorial control and resource appropriation in dynastic China (Xu / Ribot 2004), but continued to be reflected in economic development plans over the coming decades (Tilt 2014).

Over the years, the mobilisation of ancient philosophy in political ideology in China has followed similar cycles of neglect and re-discovery. Mao Zedong Thought, a building block of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", reinterpreted Marxism through the incorporation of Chinese philosophy. In particular, Mao built on a long tradition of naïve dialecticism as articulated in the classical text I Ching and in Daoist thought (Dirlik 1996). Such Sinicisation of Marxism

resulted in an amalgam of ideals, in which modernist developmental thinking was infused with "traditional" values (Chenshan 2019). While Confucian thought was actively condemned during the Mao era, it began to re-emerge in CPC rhetoric around the 1990s. The Jiang Zemin administration (1993–2003) explicitly mobilised Chinese philosophy in CPC rhetoric, including by integrating the Confucian term "harmony" (和谐观/大同观) in diplomatic practice. The embrace of Confucianism became more evident in successive administrations, from Hu Jintao's slogan of a harmonious society to Xi Jinping's routine promotion of Confucian ideas. In recent years, the very notion of "traditional" thought has been complicated by the CPC's merging of references to ancient Chinese civilisation with communist ideology, a strategy that supports the legitimisation of the CPC model of statism (Callahan 2015).

As already mentioned, the debate on ecological civilisation has located the narrative within this revival of deep-rooted values. Academic references to ecological civilisation appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Huan 2016). Two different views emerged among Chinese scholars, in which the key difference lies in its relationship with industrialisation (Lu 2017, 2019). The first view considers ecological civilisation to be a part of and complementary to industrial civilisation. The argument is that because of the absence of an ecological mind-set, industrial development has caused ecological problems. Therefore, once humans learn to protect ecosystems, industrial society can be "fixed" and ecological crises can be resolved (Lu 2019). Ecological civilisation thus denotes the "ecologicalisation" of industrial society; this perspective closely mirrors the ecological modernisation debate in Anglophone scholarship (cf. Buttel 2000).

The second view, which is more radical, considers ecological civilisation to be a more advanced form of human civilisation (Lu 2019). The argument is that industrial civilisation, governed by capitalist logic, is incapable of addressing ecological breakdown. Ecological civilisation represents a new human society – reached through a teleological progression from agricultural, to industrial, to ecological civilisation – that transcends capitalist ideology (Wang 2020). As a political term, "ecological civilisation" is first and foremost used by the CPC (Goron 2018). In 2007, the concept was endorsed by former President Hu Jintao. On 1 July 2021, at a ceremony marking the centenary of the founding of the CPC, ecological civilisation was presented by Xi Jinping as an integral component of a new model for human advancement (Xi 2021). Nevertheless, in political discourse ecological civilisation is described both as a component of industrial civilisation and as an advanced form of human civilisation, indicating conceptual ambiguity.

To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of ecological civilisation, we focus on two philosophical principles associated with the narrative: "holism" (全局观/整体观) and "harmony" (和谐观/大同观). These concepts have roots in a Chinese worldview represented by a correlative cosmology (Schwartz 1973),

which assumes that social reality is composited of innumerable, interdependent relations (Dongsun 1995, Rošker 2017). In this understanding of the universe, holism assumes that humans are part of a greater whole. Holism is proposed as a "cultural fundamental" of East Asian philosophy that can be traced back to Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism (Lim et al. 2011). As a principle with an incredibly long history, holism is not defined within any single body of thought. However, one strand of theory suggests that from a holistic perspective, ethical rules should be considered through the lens of communal objectives. According to this interpretation, "strategies and decisions are taken in view of achieving goals which are required to benefit the entire group, not any one individual" (Lin / Huang 2014). Members of a community will prosper when the whole prospers (Lim et al. 2011).

"Harmony", likewise, is a complex construct. In Confucian thought, harmony has been understood to represent "an active process in which heterogeneous elements are brought into a mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing, and often commonly benefiting relationship" (Li 2013: 1). The concept embraces a diversity of relationships (e.g., interpersonal harmony, harmony between humanity and nature) on multiple levels (e.g., between individuals, in a family, or a nation; Li 2008). Conceptualised under the correlative cosmology, harmony is by its nature relational, meaning that it is achieved through an equilibrium built upon interaction within networks of interdependent components (Li 2008). For society, harmony can imply a social order that emphasises relations ordered by ethical rules (Xiaohong / Qingyuan 2013). In this context, stability relates to systems of rule that structure social hierarchies (Yao / Yao 2000), which does not imply conformity or obedience, but dynamic tension and negotiation to reconcile difference (Li 2013).

Table 1: Translation of the concepts of holism and harmony into holistic thinking and maintenance of stability in CPC rhetoric

Confucian value	CPC principle	Examples of expression in CPC rhetoric	
holism	holistic thinking	**The CPC Constitution**	The CPC represents the fundamental interests of the nation as a whole / the overwhelming majority of the people
		Jiang Zemin's Three Represents	Economic production, cultural development, and the interests of the majority of the people
		Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream	Reflects the aspirations of the Chinese nation as a whole, including all ethnic groups
harmony	stability overwhelms everything	**Deng Xiaoping**	Stability is presented as a necessary precondition for economic development and social progress (CPC, ND)
		Hu Jintao	Avoid self-inflicted setbacks / don't rock the boat (*bu zhe teng*) (China Central Government Portal 2009)

Source: Compiled by the authors

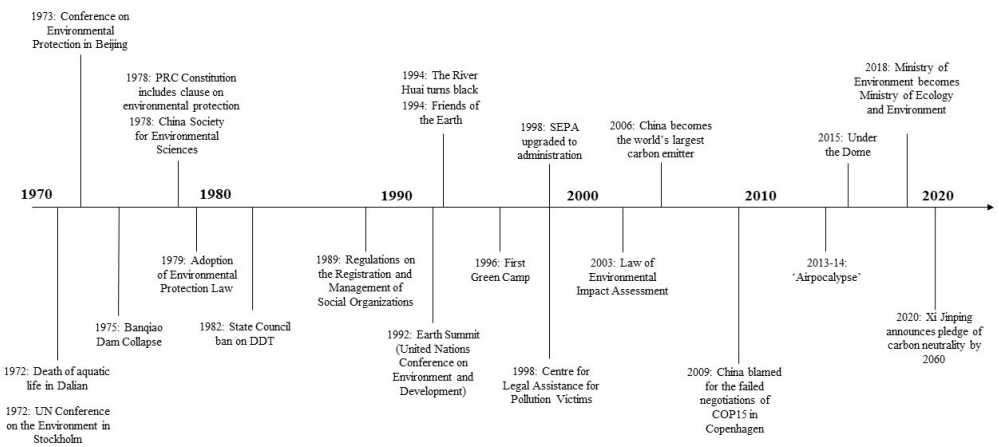
Structuring principles of contemporary environmental governance

To explore how the principles of holism and harmony have shaped environmental governance practices, we conducted a review of the literature on modern environmental history in China. We focused this review on contentious issues (e.g., pollution, hydropower and wildlife protection) that have shaped the boundaries of political action in this domain (Figure 1). We searched for continuities within this material (e.g., persistent rationalities and forms of action) and reflected on emerging patterns from the perspective of structuring principles for action. As explained above, the concepts of holism and harmony derive from multifaceted debates, neither of which can be neatly assigned a simple definition. Our interest, however, is not in the philosophical meaning of these terms, but in their translation into CPC ideology and practice (Table 1). In fact, as explained in detail below, the governing principles of holistic thinking and maintenance of stability bear only a tenuous resemblance to their philosophical derivatives. While the CPC does make strategic references to these ideals (which support their ideological project), their expression in environmental action have less to do with ethics and more to do with practical governance challenges.

Holistic thinking

In Maoist Thought, holism has been expressed through a form of "holistic thinking", understood according to a distinction between primary and secondary "contradictions". This describes how an overarching purpose can be identified at the level of society, encompassing multiple individual interests

Figure 1: Key moments in China's modern environmental history, 1970–2020



Source: Compiled by the authors (based on Bao 2006, 2009; Boyd 2013; Hilton 2013; Moser 2013; Muldavin 2000; Shapiro 2001; Tilt 2009)

that may conflict on lower levels. Thus, "the whole is greater than the parts and the parts are subordinate to the overall situation. When the overall interests and specific interests conflict, the overall interests must first be given priority" (Wang 2001).

In line with these ideas, we identify the following distinguishing features of holistic thinking. Holistic thinking is deployed by the CPC to provide a unified ("holistic") purpose for the nation. It is used to develop nation-building projects that symbolise progress, simultaneously demonstrating the validity of socialism as a path to national fulfilment and the unique capacity of the CPC to lead the people of China to this destination. Accordingly, the CPC often highlights its ability to represent the interests of the Chinese nation, and its people, as a whole. Some scholars describe the CPC as a "holistic interest party" (Zhang 2017). This logic has been articulated by a succession of political leaders, including through Jiang Zemin's Three Represents and Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.[1] Holistic thinking is intimately linked with strategies to build output legitimacy, that is, a form of political purchase fixed in the delivery of social goods. This is a well-known phenomenon in Chinese politics; as the non-democratic regime cannot seek legitimacy through democratic performance (procedural legitimacy), it instead builds public trust and support by satisfying utilitarian needs (Guo 2010). That is, the regime derives power from the people by delivering on their material demands (Xie 2020). Further, holistic thinking operates through a centralised state apparatus, which means that the balancing of values and the construction of knowledge that underpin decisions are often geographically removed from the locations where decisions have an impact. This creates a privileged position for the centre, through which the interests of far-flung regions can be easily framed as "lower level" concerns.

We trace the logic of holistic thinking back to the early practices of environmental governance in China. Already in the early 1970s, the political leadership was acutely aware of widespread environmental deterioration, caused particularly through industrialisation and the use of agricultural chemicals (Bao 2006, Muldavin 2000). China was represented at the 1972 Stockholm Conference of the Environment, which was followed by a national Conference on Environmental Protection in 1973. Both events introduced environmental protection into China's political identity. The national Conference on Environmental Protection in Beijing in 1973 communicated that socialism, which unlike capitalism serves the masses, has the ability to tackle industrial pollution (Bao 2006). The conference was followed by the adoption of China's first environmental policy documents and an administrative system for pollution management.

1 The "Three Represents" theory was put forward by Jiang Zemin. It refers to what the Communist Party of China represents: 1) the development of advanced means of production, 2) an advanced culture, and 3) the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China. The "Chinese Dream" was proposed by Xi in 2012. At its core, it represents the imaginary of a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Additional policies were introduced during China's reform era. The 5th National People's Congress in 1978 included a new statement on environmental protection in the PRC constitution, creating a strong legal basis for ecosystem protection (ibid.). The second National Conference on Environmental Protection in 1983 confirmed environmental protection as a strategic development objective, accompanied by new policy instruments (e.g., environmental impact assessments, market tools and stricter implementation guidelines; see Bao 2006). Still, environmental destruction continued. In 1994, the Huai River turned black, becoming a symbolic representation of unprecedented ecosystem collapse (Economy 2004).

Explanations of the failure to curb ecosystem deterioration have centred around two factors. The first is inappropriate institutional design, which refers to the weakness of environmental protection agencies and ambiguous regulations. The environmental protection administration was only upgraded to ministerial status in 2008 and always enjoyed less influence than economic departments (Jahiel 1998). The second – more influential – explanation is the tendency of national and local government to prioritise the economy over the environment.[2] This follows the logic of an environmental Kuznets curve of development, which assumes that a resource-intensive stage of industrialisation must precede a clean phase of prosperity. We agree with both of these explanations, but provide a complementary reading based on holistic thinking.

During the formulation of a policy framework for environmental protection, the "primary contradiction" in China related to poverty alleviation. As stated at the 6th plenary session of the 11th CPC Central Committee in 1981, the "principal contradiction in our society is one between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and the backwardness of social production" (Lin 2018). The top priority for the nation was to deliver material wellbeing for the population. Approaching this dilemma in terms of the interest of the nation as a whole explains the (sometimes intentional) neglect of environmental regulations whilst pursuing a basic quality of life for millions of Chinese people. The structuring logic here was not simply one of "economy over the environment", but a form of holistic thinking oriented towards the pursuit of "the fundamental interests of the nation as a whole", or the provision of benefits for "the overwhelming majority of the people" (Lin 2018). The discrepancy between the philosophical principle of holism (rooted in the human–nature balance) and the political practice of holistic thinking (emphasising state-led nation-building projects) is particularly clear in this developmental logic.

The principle of holistic thinking also manifests in other environmental domains, such as pollution legislation. In 1989, China's Environmental Protection Law stated that all individuals and organisations had the right and obligation to report pollution. Yet, environmental law has continually been criticised for

2 Cf. Jahiel 1998, Qi et al. 2008, Wang et al. 2014, Zhang / Wen 2008 and many others.

its weak enforcement (Wang 2006, Wang 2010). Environmental tribunals have increased since 1995, especially following the State Council support of public lawsuits in 2005 (Hilton 2013). However, barriers remain: courts refuse to hear cases, there is often insufficient evidence to win, and proceedings are prevented by local economic interests (Moser 2013, Zander 2017). Lawyers who take on sensitive cases face low payment, harassment and persecution (Fu 2018, Van Rooij 2010). According to the CPC approach to holistic thinking, individual grievances can be downplayed or overlooked as long as they are not considered relevant to the nation's primary development objective.

In other words, in a structured order of priorities, individual instances that conflict with overarching national purposes can be legitimately ignored. Individual cases only matter when they become indispensable to a broader agenda (for example, as through Li Keqiang's war on pollution in 2014). This problem can be interpreted in terms of a weak legal system, yet this does not reflect a historically weak legal tradition in China. On the contrary, Confucian ideology views legality as embedded in principles of morality (Jiang 2021), and there is an extended tradition of legal philosophy informing imperial rule, such as through the writings of Han Fei (Winston 2005). Legal systems were rebuilt and strengthened throughout the reform era, including through the rapid expansion of environmental law (Wang 2006). In terms of CPC governing practices, however, the Mao administration introduced a model of socialist legality, which allowed for the complete abolition of the legal apparatus and transfer of legal power to the party (Baum 1986). One can trace the legacy of placing CPC interests above the legal system in the continued neglect of environmental law enforcement. That is, the texts of legal documents are of less importance than national development (the priority of the CPC at the time); the interests of the whole override the law.

Hydropower is an extremely emotive policy domain in China, also shaped by holistic thinking. This topic is linked with memories of nationalist dreams and disastrous construction failures in the Mao era (Boyd 2013). Hydrologist Huang Wanli's opposition to the Sanmenxia Dam on the Yellow River, resulting in bans on his research, is emblematic of the repression of dissent during this period (Shapiro 2001). The monumental Banqiao Dam collapse in 1975 came to symbolise the risks of large hydropower projects (Geall 2013). Environmental movements have emerged from resistance against such projects, which threaten irreversible biodiversity loss, loss of livelihoods and cultural identity, and enormous population displacements (Tilt 2014). The intense contestation around hydropower has functioned as a driver of the pluralisation of China's environmental policy-making system, as coalitions of NGOs, media and environmental departments have resisted these projects in the name of protecting society and the environment (Mertha 2011).

At the same time, the continued support for hydropower and its position as a central pillar of China's "modern energy system" in the 14th FYP (NDRC 2021) demonstrates the power of holistic thinking within this policy domain. Tilt (2014) has explored the moral dilemma involved in balancing conflicting demands around hydropower. He concluded that coalitions of the central government with energy corporations have consistently framed hydropower as essential for economic growth, which has proven the primary concern in these debates. This political dynamic reveals the weighing of local concerns against national development priorities, resulting in the intentional neglect of lower-level concerns (the wellbeing of the nation as a whole legitimises such sacrifices). It also showcases the weight of scientific expertise in holistic decision-making processes (Tilt 2014).

A final policy area that illustrates this logic is resource management. The FYPs have always considered how the country's limited natural resources would meet the needs of development. It was already apparent in the 1970s that domestic energy resources would be insufficient for the planned economic expansion. Energy conservation was adopted as an objective in the 6th FYP (1981–1985; Zhiping et al. 1994), followed by energy security and energy efficiency targets in subsequent decades (Meidan et al. 2009, Tsang / Kolk 2010). In terms of ecological protection, this has translated into an interest in carrying capacities and ecological limits. For example, China's 13th FYP stated that based on "the master strategy for regional development […] we will promote […] development that is within the carrying capacity of the environment and natural resources" (NDRC 2016: 103). This statement demonstrates the intention to align development with available ecological resources, combat the "irrational" distribution of resource-intense development and alleviate pressures in the "underdeveloped" Western provinces (where sensitive ecosystems and valuable natural resources are located).

The most recent expression is Ecological Conservation Redlines (ECRs), which have emerged as a strategy to protect sensitive ecosystems (Gao et al. 2020, Xu et al. 2018). ECRs represent the "cross-sector integration of ecological protection systems to correct the current problem of decentralization and implement effective management of ecosystems across China's vast geographic range" (Gao et al. 2020: 1520). This policy strategy reflects holistic thinking by ensuring that China's natural environment can sustain its path towards a "moderately prosperous" (xiaokang) society. It accomplishes "the goal of national development by drawing upon the resources of peripheral regions" (Tilt 2014: 8), ensuring that natural resources are mobilised to serve central policy preferences.

Harmony – the maintenance of stability

The principle of harmony is articulated by the CPC as the maintenance of stability. Strategies to maintain stability emerged in response to threats of fragmentation and disruption of China's vast, heterogeneous territory. Since Emperor Qin Shi Huang unified China and established a centralised state (in 221 BCE), the nation has been governed by an authority with far-reaching responsibility for maintaining "peaceful order" (Zhao 2006). This relates to the need to protect the integrity of the political regime and maintain the status quo (Yu 2018), including through the use of violence. In 1989, when Deng Xiaoping met US President Bush in Beijing, he proclaimed that "[i]n China the overriding need is for stability. Without a stable environment, we can accomplish nothing and may even lose what we have achieved" (Deng 2010). "Stability overwhelms everything" became a guiding principle of governance (Yu 2018) and a top priority for leaders on all government levels (Zhou 2017). As with holistic thinking, the discursive association between stability and economic expansion allows the principle of maintenance of stability to function as a chief source of political legitimacy (Sandby-Thomas 2008), while any threat is framed as jeopardising the path towards social and material wellbeing (ibid.).

The maintenance of stability is deeply intertwined with measures to maintain social control. This relates to authoritarian techniques of oppression, such as monitoring and limiting mobilisation and dissent, as well as to more sophisticated techniques of communication that allow the formulation and pursuit of collective goals. Teets argues that China operates according to a "consultative" authoritarian model – "an interactive and dynamic process whereby government officials and civil society leaders learn from experiences with each other" (Teets 2014: 2). This reflects a culture of social interaction that builds on an extended history of reconciliation of difference through dialogue. This suggests that while the regime maintains a semi-authoritarian system, the absence of conflict does not equate with an absence of contestation. In fact, there is constant negotiation of the rules that maintain stability.

Since the reform period, the concept of stability itself has morphed. "Dynamic stability" that builds on reflexivity and responsiveness is gradually replacing a concept of "static stability" dominated by "blocking" (a translation from Chinese, which can be understood as "blocking of public opinion or dissent") (Yu 2018). This flexibility is reflected in an increasing acceptance of governance modes and policy interventions based on experimentation (Lo / Castán Broto 2019). In this case, principles of harmony (as a form of mutually balancing, cooperatively enhancing beneficial relationships) can be understood as operating within the authoritarian regime, thus translating into various forms of resistance, self-regulation and negotiation.

Historically, the construction of the environment as a political domain relates to the establishment of a boundary between interventions that maintain stability and those that challenge it. The maintenance of this boundary explains why some forms of environmental action are approved by the party, while others are distinctly off-limits. For instance, this tension has dictated the emergence of environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in China, including their form, function and area of engagement. During the Mao era, few organisations outside the state were permitted (Ho 2001), but the reform period gradually introduced rights of association alongside a growing civil society (Hilton 2013). In the late 1980s, new laws on freedom of association were introduced, although in limited form (ibid.). Various restrictions were inspired by the fear that any form of social mobilisation could lead to state collapse. Despite this control, the number of ENGOs grew in the 1990s in parallel with the emergence of a middle class and the rise of environmental consciousness (Bao 2006, Bao 2009). Recognising the ineffectiveness of environmental regulations, the government acknowledged the need for multiple actors to address environmental issues (Bao 2009). While this included ENGOs, their characteristics were shaped by the concern with maintaining social stability. Strict regulations specified whether and how ENGOs were permitted, including the need for official approval, sponsorship and non-overlapping activities with other NGOs (Bao 2009, Ho, 2001). The majority of ENGOs were denied access to legal status and funding, and their activities were limited to non-confrontational or "politically innocent" activities (Bao 2009, Ho 2001). These approaches continue to be evident today. In the limited space for political advocacy that remains under the Xi Jinping administration, ENGOs strategically cultivate their relations with government bodies to communicate issues, carefully frame demands to sustain pressure but avoid direct confrontation, and collaborate with the media to ensure visibility of environmental concerns (Dai / Spires 2018).

Such tension is also apparent in the activities of journalists. In the 1990s, local newspapers began to report on previously taboo issues, including the environment (Geall 2013). Since then, journalists have used the media as a conduit for reporting on political concerns, such as corruption, lack of transparency, lack of participation and political rights (ibid.). However, this reporting is conducted within tightly defined boundaries. Liu Jianqiang, an environmental reporter, stated in 2010 that "[t]he environment in China is not politics" (Liu 2010). This statement demonstrates how journalists constantly navigate the boundary between socially acceptable topics and political issues; as long as environmental issues are not considered a threat to social stability, they are not considered to be political. Journalists push the boundaries of politics with their reporting, always cognisant of state retaliation when their activism goes too far (Mao's

Hundred Flowers campaign represents a historical reminder of the ultimate consequences of crossing this line[3]).

Likewise, environmental activists align their activities with the rationale of maintaining stability and often accept that their work is most effective when it supports government objectives. This is, for example, evidenced in the large number of non-state organisations focusing on technical dimensions of environmental protection (Westman / Castán Broto 2019). The first ENGO established in China, in 1978, was the China Society for Environmental Sciences (Bao 2009). This was followed by a list of environmental organisations with close links to the state, frequently described as government-organised NGOs (GONGOs). For example, the Institute for Environment and Development, which provides business training in clean production, pursues goals closely aligned with public policy (Ho 2001). Wildlife conservationists have, similarly, navigated a space perceived as non-confrontational and therefore appropriate (Bao 2009, Boyd 2013). For example, Friends of Nature, a highly effective wildlife protection group established by Liang Congjie in 1994, was explicitly framed as a collaborative programme supporting government-led environmental protection (Boyd 2013). Conservation campaigns are less successful when they stray into conflictual politics. For example, species protection can overlap with contested issues of deforestation and land development (e.g., the entrenched economic interests entangled in deforestation in Yunnan; see Boyd 2013). The conflicts that occur in these cases jeopardise social stability, and, as a result, undermine the success of environmental campaigns.

Ecological civilisation – What does it mean in practice?

The logics of holistic thinking and of maintaining stability have structured activist and policy-oriented interventions in environmental governance in China for decades. We argue that they are central to the formation of political responses carried out in the name of ecological civilisation. To begin with, ecological civilisation responds directly to a shift in the "primary contradiction" in China. With rapid economic growth and the gradual realisation of the national goal of building a moderately prosperous society, the main priority for the nation has been redefined. In 2017, the 19th National Congress Report stated that:

> [S]ocialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, the principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved. What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life (China Central Government Portal 2009).

3 During the Hundred Flowers campaign, which took place between 1956–1957, the CPC invited citizens to openly express their opinions and dissatisfaction with current social and political conditions. However, immediately following the campaign, party dissenters were rounded up and violently punished.

This shift in priorities occurred as the destruction of the environment came to affect the welfare of the nation as a whole. The principle of "development first" was clearly no longer tenable as an objective that represented the benefits of the majority. Instead, ecological civilisation was adopted as a national priority and unifying development objective of the CPC. At the same time, ecological deterioration had grown into a major threat to social stability. In the past decade, environmental pollution has become a top cause of social unrest and a leading factor behind "environmental mass incidents" in China (i.e., violent protests and uprisings; cf. Bloomberg 2013, Ma 2008). Chai Jing's documentary "Under the Dome", for instance, was a landmark event that ignited a nationwide debate on air pollution. Although the documentary was soon banned in mainland China, it alerted the political leadership to the urgency of addressing pollution issues. In response to this threat to social stability, ecological civilisation was articulated as a path to socialist modernisation. In 2018, the Ministry of Environment was restructured into an expanded and more influential Ministry of Ecology and Environment, stressing the newfound concern with ecological protection at the highest level of political power.

The operational meaning of ecological civilisation in different domains can be understood in relation to the degree to which environmental programmes match the two principles of holistic thinking and maintenance of stability. For example, resource conservation is likely to be prominent on ecological civilisation agendas and potentially very effective. Xi Jinping's address at the 19th Party Congress remarked:

> We should, acting on the principles of prioritising resource conservation and environmental protection and letting nature restore itself, develop spatial layouts, industrial structures, and ways of work and life that help conserve resources. […] We will encourage conservation across the board and promote recycling, take action to get everyone conserving water, cut consumption of energy and materials, and establish linkages between the circular use of resources and materials in industrial production and in everyday life. We encourage simple, moderate, green, and low-carbon ways of life, and oppose extravagance and excessive consumption. (Xi 2017a)

This statement captures the unproblematic relationship between CPC objectives and resource conservation. In terms of adopting efficient technologies of production, shifting towards circular industrial models and encouraging environment-friendly lifestyles, there are no contradictions – only benefits to both industry and society. As these forms of action clearly follow holistic thinking (resource conservation is required for continued development) and maintenance of stability (win-win solutions for the state and corporate sector), we expect a continuation of success similar to that witnessed in earlier resource management programmes (e.g., energy efficiency; see Jiang 2016, Sinton et al. 1998, Zhou et al. 2010). This optimism is reflected in the strong focus on sustainable consumption and production, technology innovation and the circular economy in government programmes and in scholarly debates on ecological civilisation (Wei et al. 2011).

Likewise, pollution control is likely to be pursued aggressively and could be highly effective at a macro level. Pollution was a key area targeted by concepts that informed ecological civilisation, such as the ideas on ecological agriculture as a solution to ecosystem degradation proposed by Ye Qianji in the 1980s (Marinelli 2018). In 2005, Pan Yue (then vice minister of the EPA) made a speech to international journalists in which he admitted the system-threatening character of environmental degradation in China, especially in terms of pollution and its catastrophic impact on health (Hilton 2013). Combating pollution, the most visible form of environmental degradation, will continue to be a core agenda for the CPC, especially through more stringent enforcement of industrial and agricultural emission guidelines. However, as discussed above, pollution control will not necessarily be effective in individual cases or when pollution control conflicts with macro-agendas. For example, we expect challenges in environmental litigation to remain (unless strategically linked with broader development agendas) and a continued reliance on coal power plants for years to come.

Current CPC rhetoric contains a very strong emphasis on the protection of ecological zones, including ecological red conservation lines. Xi Jinping's address at the 19th National Congress highlighted this form of action in particular. His statement not only unambiguously stressed the valuation of the natural environment, but also holistic thinking in ecosystem protection:

> Building an ecological civilisation is vital to sustain the Chinese nation's development. We must realise that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and act on this understanding. Efforts to develop a system for building an ecological civilisation have been accelerated; the system of functional zoning has been steadily improved. […] We must realise that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and act on this understanding […] and cherish the environment as we cherish our own lives. We will adopt a holistic approach to conserving our mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, and grasslands, implement the strictest possible systems for environmental protection. […] Only by observing the laws of nature can mankind avoid costly blunders in its exploitation. Any harm we inflict on nature will eventually return to haunt us. (Xi 2017b: 20, 45)

We believe that interest in protecting ecological zones will continue to increase. Ecosystem collapse is clearly contrary to the interest of the nation as a whole, and a "rational distribution" of development activities according to regional resources matches the logic of holistic thinking. Pan Jiahua is the director of CASS Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies; his interpretation of ecological civilisation captures this inclination clearly, placing carrying capacities front and centre of the debate (Pan 2016). Ecosystem protection in many cases overlaps with habitat and biodiversity protection, trademark domains for Chinese ENGOs. Causes championed by ENGOs working for wildlife conservation may continue to be successful, but only when their campaigns align with reforestation and ecosystem protection interventions determined through nation-wide analyses of ecosystem limits and a rational (centrally dictated) distribution of development activities.

Although ecological civilisation is likely to act as a forceful policy narrative in the above domains, it will probably have limited reach in others. The situation is complicated in areas where environmental policy objectives do not align with holistic thinking or maintenance of stability. In particular, this relates to activities that are core to capitalist reproduction, such as resource extraction, accumulation of capital, and continued economic growth. Ecological civilisation emerged as a critique of the neoliberal co-optation of the state and China's integration into the global capitalist economy (Gare 2012). Scholars that view capitalism as "inherently anti-ecological" (Wang et al. 2014: 47) therefore argue that ecological civilisation needs to dismantle capitalism. In this vein, Pan Yue originally mobilised the concept in rejection of Western development models.

In CPC political practice, however, ecological civilisation is highly unlikely to perform such a function. From the perspective of holistic thinking, the concept in fact delivers the opposite aim. Communism is depicted by the CPC as a utopian endpoint, to be reached by passing through capitalist development. Within China's current national agenda, ecological civilisation features as a strategy to support socialist modernisation. Ecological civilisation is a means to pursue green economic development, with the support of science and technology. In terms of nation-building projects, capitalist rationales thus remain firmly embedded in ecological civilisation programmes (as also observed by Hansen et al. 2018). In terms of maintenance of stability, any challenge to the capitalist economy would require the overhaul of fundamental structures of ownership, wealth and political economies. Such undertakings would threaten not only the privilege of the ruling class in China, but also the social wellbeing that has delivered political legitimacy for decades. These contradictions suggest that it is currently out of the question for ecological civilisation to take on the challenge of dismantling the capitalist economy.

Conclusions

Environmental discourses structure the problem frames and perceptions of available solutions, thereby shaping action. In the context of domestic politics in China, ecological civilisation is a narrative that creates legitimacy for certain forms of environmental interventions (while discounting others). We expect that a range of actors will be supported in their efforts to pursue environmental protection, whether through new models of urban planning, development of new materials and industries, adoption of new technology, or protection of sensitive ecosystems. A strength of holistic thinking lies in its ability to encourage experimentation and variety as long as these can be linked with national priorities. Yet, if there is a dark side to ecological civilisation, it lies in the risk that projects carried out under its banner could have harmful impacts at the local

level whilst serving "higher order" interests. For instance, reforestation in the Western regions could be considered acceptable even if it encroaches on struggles for cultural identity and autonomy (Yeh 2009). This danger is real, even though such dynamics existed within China's political system long before the emergence of this narrative. The extent to which the discourse may be used to serve oppressive politics remain, however, to be seen.

What, finally, are the implications for international politics? There is a pronounced concern that non-democratic practices will gain purchase as China's influence abroad expands. For instance, the "soft power of harmony" may become coercive when linked with the power of hegemony (Hagström / Nordin 2020). While Chinese norms travel internationally, ecological civilisation rationales are not likely to be expressed in a straightforward way. As explained in this paper, the principles of holistic thinking and maintenance of social stability are tied to China's political system and formulated specifically in relation to national concerns. While tactics of ecological protection (e.g., conservation redlines) can diffuse, the underpinning logics cannot be readily transplanted.

At this stage, the extrapolation of environmental governance trends from within China to other locations risks yielding shallow or inaccurate analyses. Not only is it too early to predict what effects ecological civilisation may have beyond China's borders, but, also, unexpected outcomes may result from the complex encounter between Chinese interests and diverse groups affected by projects on the ground. Thus, the dynamics of a post-dichotomous global landscape evade the available lexicon of geopolitical analysis and constitute a matter for future empirical study.

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