



**Looking Beyond the Crossroads: Rethinking  
China's Ecological Civilization amidst the  
COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Saloni Sharma**

© Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

Institute of Chinese Studies,  
B-371 (3rd floor), Chittaranjan Park,  
Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110 019

Landline Telephone: +91-11-4056 4823 Fax: +91-11-23830728

Email: [info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org)

Website: [www.icsin.org](http://www.icsin.org)

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Saloni Sharma is a PhD candidate at Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has been awarded several scholarships and fellowships including ICS-HYI Fellowship, Junior Research Fellowship, Young India Fellowship, and Erasmus Mundus Scholarship. Her research interests lie in China's environmental philosophies and governance.

Contact: [saloni1451@gmail.com](mailto:saloni1451@gmail.com)

# Looking Beyond the Crossroads: Rethinking China's Ecological Civilization amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Abstract

The last decade witnessed major shifts in China's environmental governance. While it once seemed that China discounted environmental concerns for industrial growth, climate issues gradually became key components of both governance and propaganda. The awakening of this consciousness was marked by a milestone when China became a signatory to the Paris Agreement. In the 19th National Congress, Xi Jinping's Thought of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era highlighted the vision of an 'Ecological Civilization' for the construction of a 'Beautiful China'. However, at the closing of this decade, COVID 19 marks an unexpected shift in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

There have been many optimistic studies suggesting favourable ecological outcomes due to the global lockdown and reduced human activity, like reduction in carbon emissions and decrease in overall air, water and soil pollution, particularly in China. This paper, while exploring such implications, stresses on the phenomenon of the virus as an instrument for rethinking governance and propaganda models in the ecological and other connected domains. It links the concept of Ecological Civilization to its more holistic Chinese roots and holds the Chinese regime to that interpretation, rather than a narrower anthropocentric notion of environmental sustainability.

**Keywords:** Ecological Civilization, Environmental Governance, COVID-19, Ecological Thinking, Ecosophy

## Introduction

*If the seasons of husbandry be not interfered with, the grain will be more than can be eaten. If close nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds, the fish and turtles will be more than can be consumed. If the axes and bills enter the hill-forests only at the proper times, the wood will be more than can be used.*

*-Mencius*

The last decade witnessed major shifts in China's environmental governance. During the phase of rapid industrialization, China uplifted a major chunk of its population above the poverty line. In 1978, China's economy ranked 73; by 2010, it had become the second biggest economy in the world. In three decades, China transformed itself from a poor agrarian economy into the second largest economy in the world and raised standards of living for its citizens. This is the well-documented and oft-quoted story of China's miraculous economic growth that has brought in its wake the tags of being the biggest manufacturer, and the number one economy by purchasing power. This economic miracle, however, has come at a severe environmental cost.

This paper is structured in the following way: first I have laid out China's brief history of engagement with environmental concerns that have spiked in the last decade as a by-product of massive industrialization so as to set the context for entering into the discussion on China's 'Ecological Civilization', which is covered in detail in the next section. Taking a leaf out of the official speech of Xi Jinping at the 19th NPC, I have made an attempt to define Ecological Civilization from an abstraction to a concrete ideology, as viewed by the Chinese leadership. Later, I discuss the normative dimension of environmental governance or the lack thereof in Party discourses and stress upon the need to welcome an ecological perspective in the convoluted abstraction that Ecological Civilization is that is charged by commercial environmentalism. I argue that in the face of calamities like the COVID-19, there is a greater need to review and revise our vision towards the collective ecology.

During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China showcased itself as a successful model of the Communist style of governance as it opened its gates to bring the world in. However, there was a stain on this fairytale of growth: along with the surprising levels of prosperity, came the issue

of alarming levels of pollution. The authorities had to make arrangements for artificial alterations in weather conditions in case the city chokes with smog. While China was on a steadfast mission towards breakneck development, environmental concerns were becoming disturbingly apparent. China held its stance of ‘Right to Development’ at the 2009 COP15 talks in Copenhagen – leading to disputes between developing and developed countries. In this regard, China’s ‘Two Centennial Goals’ were put forward during the 18th National Congress in 2012, aiming to ‘build a moderately prosperous society’ by eradicating poverty by 2021 and building a ‘strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country’ by 2049, and the issue of environmental pollution soon became a pressing concern as China relentlessly jostled to maintain the double-digit GDP.

A study by Jalil and Mahmood in 2011 concluded that ‘carbon emissions are mainly determined by income, energy consumption and trade openness in the long run’ (Jalil, A. and S. Mahmood 2011: 5167). In 2010, China became the world’s largest energy consumer, accounting for nearly half of the world’s energy consumption growth over the previous decade (Shambaugh 2016: 93). It is also the largest exporter in the world. According to the World Bank, China falls in the upper-middle income group of countries. In this fashion, contemporary China ticked all three boxes.

As domestic tensions rose due to the government’s ambivalence and non-commitment to address environmental concerns, episodes of more and more NIMBY protests began occurring. ‘In 2012, the country was shaken by environmental mass protests in Sichuan, Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces over pollution from smelters, paper mills and chemical plants’ (Ma 2019). The force of 公众参与 or public involvement began garnering movement as citizens became more environmentally conscious. Contrary to the common perception, civil society played an instrumental role in creating ‘policy networks among government officials to change environmental policies’ (Teets 2018: 2).

As China began taking over the world with its economic might, it also assumed a leading role at the world stage in terms of multilateral environmental initiatives when it became a signatory to the Paris Agreement in 2015, thereby holding a baton for the rest of the world. While developed countries, specifically the United States of America held such traditional roles at the

global arena – China stepped into its shoes reflecting its firmness on environmental matters such as climate change and putting an end to disputes between developed and developing countries.

The launching of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2015, raised alarms across academia and civil society, re-energizing all forms of voices for regulating environmental concerns with a fervor. The massive infrastructural project seemingly challenged China's stated position of acting urgently towards the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Arguably, it did create 'a framework enabling China to outsource its polluting industries elsewhere, while at the same time shifting its domestic economic gears to a new phase defined by the adoption of green technologies and the embrace of a knowledge-based and service-oriented economy' (Tracy et al. 2017: 57).

This might have been a favorable proposition from the perspective of Chinese policymakers, who had already been strained to balance the consumption needs of a massive population with limited natural resources. If pollutants could be disposed of away from Chinese waters and territory, it would save up a lot of resources that go into proper disposal of hazardous waste and pollutants. With the tightening of China's environmental laws, Chinese industries would subsequently set up their operations abroad, specifically in African countries, where large-scale damage to the local environment was inflicted without any attribution of blame on the Chinese state. The problem of outsourcing pollution<sup>1</sup>, therefore, not only erodes transparency and accountability in terms of environmental impact assessment but also provides escape-routes for large-scale industries to avoid falling in line with the messy directives of environmental regulations. Since Chinese industry and the Chinese State overlap, it is the Party's responsibility to not set a global precedent that shows lack of commitment and short-sighted self-interest to the other signatories and stakeholders globally.

Pushing for an indigenous brand of 'green' development, China came up with a series of campaigns, reforms, and subsidies. Coal was substituted with natural gas pipelines in Northern China at a massive scale to reduce emissions. Coal's share of the energy mix in China dropped sharply from 72% in 2005 to 58% in 2018 although the absolute growth in coal consumption is

---

<sup>1</sup> While it is argued that China is strategically outsourcing its pollution, it may as well be argued that the rest of the world has been outsourcing their pollution for several decades by employing China as its factory. This discussion, although compelling as it is, falls outside the scope and context of the current study.

moving upwards (BP Statistical Review 2019). China still is the largest producer of emissions globally and solving the coal conundrum would help it to reach peak emissions in 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2060, as stated by Xi Jinping. Some progress is made on this front, but much is left to be accounted for. At the same time, China pushed for massive afforestation projects expecting to increase its forest coverage rate to 23.04 percent by 2020 (gov.cn 2016). When smog levels in China were rising fatally back in 2015, China's updated Environmental Protection Law came into effect that emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability in industry operations. For the first time, daily penalty fines were to be imposed on polluters that exceeded their permitted quota of emissions, in accordance with the 'polluter pays' principle. Furthermore, it also gave NGOs the right to press lawsuits against environmental polluters. Green bonds were subsequently introduced and credits for pollutants were traded in the market. China has incrementally issued directions to companies and industries and has instituted an architecture that forces them to adopt better practices.

What once seemed to be a course that China discounted at the altar of quick but unsustainable industrial growth, environmental regulations gradually became a chief aspect of governance and propaganda. In other words, this shift was not only the result of sustained pressure and criticism from activists and civil society but also integrated comfortably with the stated aims of welfare of Chinese citizenry and the larger role that the Chinese state envisioned for itself as a leader and a shaper of regulation at the global stage. Hence, it was partly a necessity and partly a practical extension of statecraft, domestically and internationally. In 2018, China's 'beautiful' dream of becoming a green and clean state was enshrined in the constitution as a goal to build an 'ecological civilization', following the 19th National Congress. 'Sweeping ministerial reforms soon followed, with the Ministry of Ecology and Environment and the Ministry of Natural Resources formed to manage and protect China's environment' (Ma 2019).

### **Dawn of the Ecological Civilization**

'Let the mountains and rivers be lush, let the earth be dyed green, let the sky be blue and fresh, let the rivers and lakes be clear, let the grasslands sing merrily...' This is the vision behind China's large-scale campaign on Ecological Civilization as explained in a State-run daily<sup>1</sup>. Such is the blueprint for building a Beautiful China. The term 'Ecological civilization' was

coined in 1984 and it was borrowed from Russian discourses. Around a year later, on 18 February 1985, the concept was published in a Chinese Newspaper, Guangming Daily. It said: Ecological civilization is the result of social influence on individuals. It is the interaction between society and nature from the perspective of contemporary ecological requirements. The article also mentioned that cultivating an ecological civilization is the substance of communism and also one of its key goals. (Li 2015)

Although originating from Russia, it was in China that the concept of Ecological Civilization was vigorously promoted. We find that the phrase is being used in China for long but ‘since its introduction into China’s Communist Party’s ideology in 2007<sup>2</sup>, and especially after President Xi Jinping endorsed it in 2013 as a major framework for the country’s environmental laws and policies, it has gained traction in Chinese society’ (Hansen et al, 2018: 195). The headline of a newspaper article in early 2015 read, ‘Xi Jinping has talked about ecological civilization more than 60 times since the past eighteen years’ (People’s Daily 2018)<sup>3</sup>. This shows that the concept of 生态文明 or Ecological civilization isn’t novel but was often used around environmental issues<sup>4</sup>. It has gained popularity in academia and general public alike only in recent years, and more so, after the 19th National Congress, having been highlighted as one of the key components in ‘Xi Jinping’s Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era’. Xi Jinping’s thought of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era’ is centred around the question of what kind of Socialism with Chinese characteristics should be adhered to and developed in the new era, and the ways towards achieving it. In the Thought, there are fourteen main directives that serve as the guiding strategy for ‘everyone in the Party so as to develop a good grasp of the essence and rich implications of the Thought and to fully and

---

<sup>2</sup> The concept of ecological civilization first appeared in official government documents at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party (CPC) in October 2007. In his report to the CPC, General Secretary and President, Hu Jintao, proposed China ‘build an ecological civilization and a model of growth and consumption, as well as industries, which are frugal in their use of energy and resources and protect the environment’. [https://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/2756809/MSSI-Briefing-Paper6\\_China\\_2016\\_0.pdf](https://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2756809/MSSI-Briefing-Paper6_China_2016_0.pdf) (Footnote suggested by anonymous reviewer)

<sup>3</sup> <http://jx.people.com.cn/n/2015/0310/c186330-24109698.html> (Accessed in November, 2020). The article further talks about Xi Jinping’s long-sighted vision to innovate the model of development for China and building an ecologically conscious civilization.

<sup>4</sup> Berthold Kuhn (2019) writes, “Between 2007 and 2017, more than 4,000 published Chinese articles and books included ecological civilization as one of their keywords, and more than 170,000 articles in mainstream press-media in China invoked the concept (Heurtebise, 2017, p. 7; Hansen et al., 2018, p. 195). The growing number of discussions and publications around the concept could be seen as an effort to Sinicize environmentalism in China and to present a specific Chinese approach and development concept to an international audience.”

faithfully apply it in all our work' (Excerpts translated from Xi Jinping's 19th NPC speech 2017).

One out of the fourteen directives speaks of the goal towards Ecological civilization. Ecological civilization is vital to sustain the Chinese nation's development and prosperity for great rejuvenation. Found within the directive of 'Speeding up Reform of the System for Developing an Ecological civilization, and Building a Beautiful China', there are essentially three components that are prescribed:

1. Promoting Green Development- In this segment, the need to increase efforts in building a legal and policy framework that would promote green production and consumption is talked about. Such a framework must foster a sound economic structure that facilitates green, low-carbon and circular development. This segment also speaks of promoting a revolution in energy production and consumption, and building an energy sector that is clean, low-carbon, safe, and efficient.
2. Solving prominent environmental problems- In this segment, the need to improve the environment and address environmental issues at the root is highlighted. It elaborates upon preventing and controlling air, water and soil pollution. Moreover, it is stated that China is to get more involved in global environmental governance and reducing emissions.
3. Intensifying the protection of ecosystems- In this segment, the plan to carry out major projects to protect and restore key ecosystems, improve the system of shields for ecological security, and to develop ecological corridors and biodiversity protection networks is shared. It also speaks of promoting afforestation, taking comprehensive steps to control desertification, stony deserts, and soil erosion, strengthening wetland conservation and restoration, and better preventing and controlling geological disasters.

The inclusion of EC in the constitution has changed a mere rhetorical tool to a concretized environmental agenda and to an extent, it has rendered representation to the subdued voices of environmentalists at the margins, it has raised awareness amongst the citizens to adopt

environment friendly habits and most importantly, has begun a discussion about the imminent environmental crisis. It also marks that China's stance from 'right to development' has turned greener, even if it's only on paper.

### **Tracing the Logic within the 'Ecological Civilization' (EC)**

Having laid out the sum and substance of the campaign as prescribed in the official ideology, I would now like to discuss the ontological and semantic dimensions of the concept that the environmental campaign is based on, while also touching upon the broader implications and its scope.

Ecological Civilization is often viewed by many as a term synonymous with sustainable development (Hanson 2019). A lot of scholars believe that it is, in essence, the Sinicization of the Western concept. However, when we view the term in that sense, it is in direct contrast with the ecological line of thinking. In that sense, the concept is neither 'ecological' nor 'civilizational'. It is only a lexical choice that renders a strong rhetorical persuasion in line with what befits the party's purpose.

Within EC, the terminology of "civilization" renders two distinct purposes. On the one hand, it evokes a collective national identity. 'The term "civilization" has a specific political meaning in the rhetoric of the CCP since Deng Xiaoping's campaign in the 1980s to promote a "spiritual civilization" (jingshen wenming 精神文明) complementing the "material civilization" (wuzhi wenming 物质文明) brought about by economic reforms' (Barmé 2013, cited in Goron 2020: 41) On the other hand, it draws on the inherent conditioning of projecting oneself as a 文明人 or a civilized (wo)man. 'It also manages to situate itself in a longer historical tradition in which the Chinese elite, since the early 20th century, has adopted a dominant Western European understanding of science as a key to civility' (Messner et al 2015: 241; Margret and Jordheim 2015, cited in Hanson et al 2018: 196).

As for the linguistic choice of the word "ecological" in EC, it may seemingly resonate with the image that the leadership paints – 'Clear water and green hills are gold and silver mountains'. These images, often seen in Chinese newspapers, videos and banners, seem to appeal to the

traditional ecological values found in Chinese canons. When Xi Jinping says, “Protect the ecological environment as you protect your eyes”, it conjures a deep regard for nature, the values of unison with nature and the interconnectedness of all beings. This in effect again consolidates a collective identity that draws on the traditions and practices associated with the long and illustrious history of Chinese civilization. In this kind of propaganda ‘official media have chosen to draw on selected interpretations of traditional philosophical texts, as well as on lessons or examples drawn from China’s socialist pasts, in order to create a cultural-national basis for the imaginary of eco-civilization’ (Hanson et al 2018: 196). In essence, it is a modern spin on traditional wisdom, making it more palatable and applicable to the industrial idiom. But in this attempt at remixology, the traditional concepts do end up getting hollowed out, losing their depth and sharpness.

Ecological Civilization, however, remains a Sinicized re-packaging of notions related to sustainable development, a term that projects a utopian image in the distant future. At the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council meeting in 2013 in Nairobi, when the term Ecological Civilization was used to persuade the international community, ‘the Chinese delegation reassured their counterparts that Ecological Civilization is a more comprehensive expression of sustainable development’ (Kaeding 2018) .

Sustainable development in itself doesn’t seem to be in line with ecological line of thinking and is neither an answer nor a solution to the global environmental challenges. ‘Disparaging analysis suggests that there exists a potential inconsistency in the SDGs, particularly between the socio-economic development and the environmental sustainability goals’ (Swain 2018). It promises economic development without compromising environmental values. Ecological civilization seems to do the same. It keeps ‘innovation’ at the heart of the campaign – promoting green and clean solutions for society’s never-ending needs. Ecological civilization, as some scholars view: ‘merely repeats the globally dominant discourses of green capitalism and ecological modernization, instead of providing an alternative to them’ (Hubbert 2015; Chen 2012; Lord 2018 cited in Goron 2018: 40). Ecological Civilization, thus, may just be an old wine in a new bottle – appended with Chinese characteristics.

Undertones of ecological civilization often go back and forth in the past and future – while on the one hand it speaks of reverence to nature, on the other hand, it also speaks of modern prosperity. The rhetoric of ecological civilization thus serves a dual purpose. It brings forward a sense of cultural identity to generate nationalistic sentiments while also sensitizing the citizens about the environment. On the international stage, it also ‘serves to consolidate Chinese soft power in these sectors, building on the spread of renewables and China’s role in climate diplomacy’ (Colantoni 2019).

### **COVID-19: A Tipping Point for Environmental Consciousness**

We now enter into a discussion of how the emergence of a global pandemic affects the cause of development and environmental concerns in China and what is the way forward for the two. This is a crucial juncture that appears as a wake-up call, a chance of resetting priorities and offers insights about the immediate future. COVID-19 has undoubtedly served as a tipping point for environmental awareness as the ‘discourse[s] on the environment during the pandemic ... offered new insights, and an opportunity for a reset in environmental understandings, including a new consciousness of global connectedness in environmental responsibility, and an opportunity to improve publics’ environmental literacy’ (Mocatta and Hawley 2020: 119).

In the same year that the term ‘Ecological Civilization’ was added into the constitution of CCP, China became the first country to face the calamity of COVID-19. The contagion continues to have enormous consequences on the life and livelihood of millions of people while shaking humanity’s pre-existing social and economic systems. It demonstrated the wrath of nature over humankind. The plundering of our natural environment for overproduction and overconsumption has resulted in recurring climatic calamities. This may just be one such natural calamity out of the several that this century is predicted to be faced with. We are yet to see what other environmental challenges surface as five out of the nine planetary boundaries have already been surpassed (Campbell et al. 2017). COVID-19, thus, offers important lessons so as to mitigate future catastrophes.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the wrath of nature over mankind. As humans have been plundering the natural environment for overproduction and overconsumption ever since the

industrial revolution, COVID-19 marks an impromptu shift in the epoch of the Anthropocene. Springing from nature's thicket, the outbreak has been an anthropogenic crisis – ripping through our pre-existing social, economic and health systems, and institutions, having implications that are akin to the effects borne during WWII. While there are many factors that indicate that anthropogenic forces have been responsible for the pandemic, the primary reasons for its transmission are population density and travel. 'Anthropogenic environmental changes, human demography, international travel, and microbial adaptation have contributed to the disease' (Skórka et al. 2020: 5). The positive correlation between the number of cases infected, deaths, urbanization and GDP compel us to challenge the pre-conceived notions regarding our pre-existing mechanisms at local and global levels. COVID-19 compels us to question the viability of our economic progress. '[t]here is a single species that is responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic – us' (Bai 2020: 918). 'As with the climate biodiversity crisis, recent pandemics are a direct consequence of human activity – particularly our global financial and economic systems, based on a limited paradigm that prizes economic growth at any cost' (918). Lessons must be undertaken from this episode for the collective history of mankind. 'What COVID-19 reveals is that: economic is environmental, is sociocultural, is philosophical, is psychological, and is geopolitical' (919).

There have been many optimistic studies suggesting favorable ecological outcomes in the aftermath of global lockdown, specifically, reduction in carbon emissions and decrease in overall air, water and soil pollution owing to the reduction in industrial activities. The situation is likely to be quite the contrary. Wildlife laws and reforms in China post the emergence of COVID-19 are mere attempts to put a band-aid on the situation – like temporarily rescuing baby pangolins from their habitat. However, illegal wildlife trade is a much bigger problem that requires much serious attention than such cosmetic measures. Humankind has already long surpassed the planetary boundary of biosphere integrity – biodiversity loss and extinctions. The economic impact of COVID-19 has pushed environmental concerns aside as the focus is on kick-starting the engines of economic growth away from this period of gloom and slumber. China's economy has taken a significant hit from the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. The 14th five-year plan post-COVID-19 suggests quite the same: vouching for a sustainable transition – the focus is on building infrastructure. While China's long term resource strategy puts China in a comfortable zone – one ought to push for better environmental management to

improve financial performance as has been done before. Ecological civilization is a much-needed concept that Sinicizes sustainable development and interlinks economy, growth and society but practical climate action has to meet theoretical scenarios. At present, a distinction needs to be made between quick but unsustainable growth and an integrative, sustained growth that pays due diligence to ecological wellbeing.

### **Looking Beyond the Crossroads: Projections and Predictions**

Looking beyond the crossroads, it's easy to conclude that COVID-19 has caused a hiccup in China's stated aim of achieving moderate prosperity by 2021 as economic growth has slacked. Whether China will rise from the COVID-19 induced slumber to kick-start the engines of the economy is the one question we must look out for. Glimpses of the 14th five-year plan suggest aggressively focusing on economic development as the way out for China's dwindling fortunes. 'What implications would this have on China's vision of Ecological Civilization?' becomes an important question to raise.

In September this year, President Xi Jinping announced that China aims to have CO<sub>2</sub> emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. However, its feasibility is in question (Normile 2020). This suggests that China's environmental stance continues to remain mixed. The 19th Central Committee of the CCP held its fifth plenary session in Beijing from October 26 to 29 to set the outline for the upcoming 14th Five Year Plan. "In the draft proposal, there are no rigid GDP targets for the next five years and instead "green growth" was mentioned 19 times ... to encourage local officials to look beyond GDP as a key performance indicator and instead focus on low-carbon and sustainable growth models." (CGTN)

### **Conclusion**

Through this paper I want to argue against the conflation of Ecological Civilization and environmental sustainability, while underscoring the differences between ecological and environmental from an ecosophical lens, and simultaneously highlighting the paradoxes found within the discourses of this campaign. The environmental worldview takes as its starting point the protection of nature that is ‘on the outside’, conserving the ‘external’ environment and safeguarding from the threats that its deterioration can bring to human beings. Environmental thinking keeps man at a central position -- treating the rest of nature as objects or ‘resources’ to be used and exploited, albeit in a sustainable manner. In this sense, it puts humans and nature in a sort of oppositional relationship, between the internal and the external.

The ecological worldview on the other hand, conceptualizes an interconnected and integrated organic whole, a unity of humans and nature. The term ‘ecological’ acknowledges the integrity of the biosphere and sees humankind as a part of it. Borrowing from Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, ‘everything is connected to everything else’ it is important to recognize that humans are after all a mere constituent of nature. There is no internal versus external debate because entities co-exist with each-other, and relationality rather than autonomy is the underlying logic. A relational approach is what the ancient Chinese wisdom advocated, as evident through literature, poetry, art and other tangible and intangible artefacts. The COVID-19 pandemic is a tipping point, a point of inflexion, which offers the opportunity to rethink human welfare, and lay out an ecological policy rather than the hitherto applied environmental one.

Ecological civilization taps into the economic dimension of thinking which merely touches upon the normative philosophical aspects if not ignoring it completely. It is important to recognize that environmental problems are essentially all anthropogenic, and they are but a ‘by-product of culture’ (Glotfelty 1996: xxi) Therefore, it is important to reassess our priorities, and review our ethical systems. Ecological thinking has a different point of view. It acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature while discarding the exchange value that environmental thinking promotes. My objective in doing so is to render an alternate perspective at looking at the environment – not through a sustainability point of view – but through an ecosophical point of view. That in essence, is what ecological civilization must entail. Using coronavirus as an instrument – I have attempted to highlight the ecological lessons that humankind could take.

Ecological Civilization as Marinelli posits is a phenomenon of the ‘future-perfect tense’ in the distant time-space. ‘Projected into the future, the discourse of eco-civilization ... avoid[s] addressing the current “timespace crisis”: it would create a temporal-spatial dystopic configuration that would operate like an auto-immune system; a fantasy of total protection and bio-political securitization, which in reality conceals the real danger, which is in the present’ (Marinelli 2018: 383) The need for constructing the ecological civilization is more urgent than ever with the result that it upholds the intrinsic values deriving from its lexical roots.

In ancient China it was believed that the external environment mirrors the internal environment. If the external environment is pleasant, the internal environment is joyous and happy; if the external environment is dark and dull, the internal environment is also gloomy. Here too, the integrated nature of inside-outside, devoid of boundaries is shown and it is this unity that the reset to ecological civilization could lead to.

Liu Zongyuan’s (柳宗元) poem Jiang Xue (江雪) makes for a befitting example:

千山鸟飞绝，万径人踪灭。  
孤舟蓑笠翁，独钓寒江雪。

Birds have vanished from the mountains, human footprints disappeared from the roads.  
A solitary boat, an old man in straw raincoat and hat, fishing alone on the cold snow-covered river.

Liu, by using external imagery alludes to the loneliness and pain in his heart due to the rampage of the war. In today’s age, we are at a war with nature. The need of the hour is to take inspiration from our heritage and the ways in which human beings have existed along with nature. One has to do away with band-aid solutions and anthropocentric resolution of climate crises. The pandemic is ample proof of the fragility of such thinking. Instead, an ecological view is what one should adopt, and one can only be hopeful that the Ecological Civilization agenda in China shapes a rethink of human-nature relations. Right now, it’s neither ecological nor civilizational but if the policy makers realize the true connotations and significance of these

words, while taking inspiration from their own historical roots, it can become a successful campaign ensuring a good life in accordance with nature for all.

**References:**

Bai, Heesoon. 2010. 'A Critical Reflection on Environmental Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 4 (2020): 916-926.

Campbell, Bruce M., Douglas J. Beare, Elena M. Bennett, Jason M. Hall-Spencer, John SI Ingram, Fernando Jaramillo, Rodomiro Ortiz, Navin Ramankutty, Jeffrey A. Sayer, and Drew Shindell. 2017. 'Agriculture production as a major driver of the Earth system exceeding planetary boundaries', *Ecology and Society* 22, no. 4 (2017).

www.gov.cn. 2016. China to increase forest coverage to 23.04 pct by 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/state\\_council/ministries/2016/01/11/content\\_281475270092344.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2016/01/11/content_281475270092344.htm).

Colantoni, Lorenzo. 'China's Vision of an Ecological Civilisation.' IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali, January 26, 2019. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/chinas-vision-ecological-civilisation>.

Diplomat, Heidi Wang-Kaeding for The. "What Does Xi Jinping's New Phrase 'Ecological Civilization' Mean?" – The Diplomat. for The Diplomat, March 6, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/what-does-xi-jinpings-new-phrase-ecological-civilization-mean/>.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Goron, Coraline. 2018. 'Ecological Civilisation and the Political Limits of a Chinese Concept of Sustainability', *China Perspectives* 2018-4, 39-52

Hansen, Mette Halskov, Hongtao Li, and Rune Svarverud. 2018. 'Ecological civilization: Interpreting the Chinese past, projecting the global future', *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 53 (2018), 195-203.

Jalil, Abdul, and Syed F. Mahmud. 'Environment Kuznets curve for CO2 emissions: a cointegration analysis for China.' *Energy policy* 37, no. 12 (2009): 5167-5172.

Jing, Li. 'Xie Zhenhua: China's Top Climate Negotiator Steps Down.' *China Dialogue*, October 26, 2020. <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/11717-xie-zhenhua-china-s-top-climate-negotiator-steps-down-2/>.

Kuhn, Berthold. "Ecological civilisation in China." *Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, en ligne* (2019).

Ma, Tianjie. 'China and the Environment: a Decade in Review', *Chinadialogue.net*, December 30, 2019. <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/11743-china-and-the-environment-a-decade-in-review/>.

Marinelli, Maurizio. 2018. 'How to build a 'Beautiful China' in the Anthropocene. The political discourse and the intellectual debate on ecological civilization', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23, no. 3 (2018): 365-386.

Mocatta, Gabi, and Erin Hawley. 2020. 'COVID-19 The coronavirus crisis as tipping point: communicating the environment in a time of pandemic', *Media International Australia* 177, no. 1 (2020): 119-124.

Normile, Dennis. 'Can China, the World's Biggest Coal Consumer, Become Carbon Neutral by 2060?' *Science*, September 29, 2020. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/09/can-china-worlds-bigger-coal-consumer-become-carbon-neutral-2060>.

People's Daily 2018, 'Shíbā dà yǐlái xìjìnpíng 60 duō cì tán shēngtài wénmíng'[Xi Jinping has talked about ecological civilisation more than 60 times since the 18th National Congress], 10 February, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0310/c1001-26666629.html>.

Shambaugh, David. *China's future*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

Skórka, Piotr, Beata Grzywacz, Dawid Moroń, and Magdalena Lenda. 2020. 'The macroecology of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Anthropocene', PloS one 15, no. 7 (2020): e0236856.

Swain, Ranjula Bali. 'A critical analysis of the sustainable development goals', In Handbook of sustainability science and research, pp. 341-355. Springer, Cham, 2018.

Teets, Jessica C. Civil society under authoritarianism: The China model. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Tracy, Elena F., Evgeny Shvarts, Eugene Simonov, and Mikhail Babenko. 'China's new Eurasian ambitions: the environmental risks of the Silk Road Economic Belt', Eurasian Geography and Economics 58, no. 1 (2017): 56-88.

www.bp.com. BP, 2019. <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-china-insights.pdf>.

Xi Jinping 2018, 'Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress, China Daily.', 4 June, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm).

Shēngtài wénmíng jiànshè de lǐlùn yǔ shíjiàn chuàngxīn yánjiū. China: Zhōngguó shèhuì kēxué chūbǎn shè, 2015.

## ICS OCCASIONAL PAPER *Back Issues*

ICS Occasional Papers showcase ongoing research of ICS faculty and associates on aspects of Chinese and East Asian politics, international relations, economy, society, history and culture.

| <b>Issue No/Month</b> | <b>Title</b>   | <b>Author</b>      |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------|
| No. 82 Dec 2021       | China's Environmental Diplomacy: From Sovereignty to Authoritarian Environmentalism    | Shagufta Yasmin    |
| No. 81 Dec 2021       | Internal Drivers of China's External Behaviour   | Shivshankar Menon  |
| No. 80 Nov 2021       | Democratisation in Oceania and its Impact on China's Influence on the Region           | Wonchibeni Patton  |
| No.79 Nov 2021        | Reason and Ethical Decision-making in Korea and India                                  | Vyjayanti Raghavan |
| No.78 Oct 2021        | Can off tracking Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cost India's gain from BCIM?           | Saheli Bose        |
| No.77 Sep 2021        | "Loveable" China in times of COVID-19<br>China's "Vaccine Diplomacy" in Southeast Asia | Anurag Vishwanath  |

## PRINCIPAL SUPPORTERS TO ICS RESEARCH FUND

### TATA TRUSTS



MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



INDIAN COUNCIL OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

GARGI AND VIDYA  
PRAKASH DUTT FOUNDATION



JAMNALAL BAJAJ  
FOUNDATION

PIROJSHA GODREJ FOUNDATION

## ICS PUBLICATIONS



A short brief on a topic of contemporary interest with policy-related inputs



Platform for ongoing research of the ICS faculty and associates

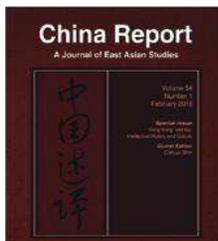


Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects and international conferences



Draft paper of ongoing research

## ICS JOURNAL



In its 57th year, *China Report* is a refereed journal in the field of social sciences and international relations. It welcomes and offers a platform for original research from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in new and emerging areas, by scholars and research students. It seeks to promote analysis and vigorous debate on all aspects of Sino-Indian relations, India-China comparative studies and multilateral and bilateral initiatives and collaborations across Asia.

*China Report* is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

Editor  
Associate Editor  
Assistant Editor  
Book Review Editor

Sreemati Chakrabarti  
G. Balachandirane  
Rityusha Mani Tiwari  
Vijay K Nambiar



**INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES**  
B-371 (3rd floor), Chittaranjan Park,  
Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110 019  
Landline Telephone: +91-11-4056 4823

<http://www.icsin.org/>

[info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org)



[twitter.com/ics\\_delhi](https://twitter.com/ics_delhi)



[facebook.com/icsin.delhi](https://facebook.com/icsin.delhi)



[In.linkedin.com/icsdelhi](https://in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi)



[soundcloud.com/ICSIN](https://soundcloud.com/ICSIN)



[youtube.com/ICSWEB](https://youtube.com/ICSWEB)



[instagram.com/icsdelhi](https://instagram.com/icsdelhi)