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A THREE-DIMENSIONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE THOUGHT OF ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Zhang Weiman
School of Marxism, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, China

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical framework of ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics is rooted in addressing the practical challenges facing China. It integrates the Marxist view of ecological civilization and China's traditional ecological culture into the construction of ecological civilization within the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This article examines pressing issues highlighted in the current ecological civilization construction and provides strategic guidance for building a "Beautiful China".

KEYWORDS: *Socialism With Chinese Characteristics, Xi Jinping, Ecological Civilization Perspective*

1. INTRODUCTION

"Ecological civilization is a significant achievement of human societal progress. Human society has experienced primitive civilization, agricultural civilization, and industrial civilization; ecological civilization is the inevitable outcome of industrial civilization reaching a certain stage and represents a new requirement for harmonious development between humanity and nature" (Xi, 2022, p. 29).

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the necessity of planning development from the perspective of "harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature". Promoting the theory of ecological civilization, which underscores this harmony, is a vital mechanism for achieving Chinese-style modernization. On July 17, 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech at the National Conference on Ecological and Environmental Protection titled *Advancing the Modernization of Harmonious Coexistence Between Humanity and Nature Through the Construction of a Beautiful China*. The speech outlined a significant strategic deployment to fully advance harmonious coexistence through the framework of building a "Beautiful China", emphasizing the central leadership's commitment to enhancing ecological civilization.

This paper adopts a comprehensive and systematic exploration of ecological civilization thought with Chinese characteristics from theoretical, practical, and empirical perspectives. It aims to facilitate a deeper understanding and implementation of Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought, contributing to the construction of a beautiful, socialist, modernized country and achieving harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature through Chinese-style modernization.

2. THEORETICAL DIMENSIONS OF ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION THOUGHT WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

The theoretical foundation of ecological civilization thought with Chinese characteristics is exceptionally rich, with origins rooted in the Marxist view of ecological civilization, the essence of traditional Chinese ecological culture, and Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought.

2.1 The Marxist View of Ecological Civilization

The original works of Marx and Engels contain numerous insights regarding ecological civilization. Unlike previous philosophers, Marx and Engels approached the relationship between humanity and nature from the standpoint of practical activity. Writing during the ascent of Western industrialization—when human efforts focused on conquering nature—Marx and Engels observed the destructive ecological consequences of capitalism's production methods. They criticized capitalism's exploitative approach toward nature and advocated for a transition toward harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature to achieve an enduring ecological civilization.

Marx argued that human society and the natural world are mutually dependent and interrelated. Humanity cannot exist in isolation from nature, as nature serves as the foundation for human life. However, humans occupy a central position in their relationship with nature, wielding their conscious agency to transform it and extract resources to meet their needs. Marx and Engels also revealed that the "human-nature-society" relationship forms an interconnected, dynamic system, emphasizing the need for systemic synergy among these elements. This perspective provides profound wisdom for ecological civilization in the modern era. As Xi (2017, p. 50) stated, "Humanity and nature

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form a community of life... Humanity's harm to nature will ultimately harm humanity itself, which is an unalterable law".

2.2 The Outstanding Traditional Ecological Culture of China

Chinese civilization, with a history spanning over 5,000 years, has accumulated profound ecological wisdom and developed an outstanding traditional ecological culture. This traditional culture, expressed through philosophy, ethics, and other dimensions, illustrates the wisdom of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. It plays a significant role in the construction of ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics and provides fertile intellectual resources for Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought. Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of integrating the fundamental principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and its traditional culture.

Confucianism and Daoism, as two cornerstone schools of thought in traditional Chinese culture, have both explored the relationship between humanity and nature. They emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, as expressed in the saying, "Heaven and I are born together; all things and I are one'. This implies that humans are an integral part of nature, inseparable from and interdependent with it. Confucianism also underscores the principle of "the way of Heaven is unchanging; it does not exist because of Yao, nor perish because of Jie", signifying the immutable laws of nature that are not subject to human will. The idea of "harmony between humanity and nature" is a central tenet of Chinese philosophy and cultural tradition. It encompasses ecological wisdom about harmonious interpersonal relationships and orderly societal development.

In traditional culture, "Heaven" refers to nature, while "human" represents humankind. The concept of "harmony between Heaven and humanity" calls for a balanced and respectful relationship between humans and nature, adhering to objective laws and avoiding actions that would disturb ecological balance and provoke nature's retaliation. Confucianism's interpretation of this harmony advocates for respecting nature and treating it with benevolence, while Daoism emphasizes principles such as "humans follow the Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature'. Daoism posits that the "Dao" is the origin of all things in the natural world and that human activities must align with nature's inherent laws and development patterns. It stresses equality in the relationship between humanity and nature.

Xi Jinping has placed great importance on combining traditional Chinese culture with contemporary practical needs to guide China's development. He remarked that concepts such as "following the way of nature" and "harmony between humanity and nature" contain valuable insights for solving contemporary human challenges. As Xi stated, "Building ecological civilization requires achieving harmony between humanity and nature, and the principle of harmony with Heaven. We must not attempt to dominate Heaven" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 24).

2.3 Xi Jinping's Ecological Civilization Thought

Xi Jinping has consistently prioritized ecological civilization construction, starting from his early experiences in Liangjiahe and extending through his leadership roles in Hebei, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, and ultimately to his position at the helm of the Central Committee. Guided by Marxist ecological thought, Xi has persistently explored and developed China's ecological civilization framework, culminating in his ecological civilization thought, the latest theoretical achievement in the sinicization of Marxism. This thought serves as a critical guide for advancing ecological civilization and building a "Beautiful China" in the new era.

The origins of Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought trace back to his seven years as a young educated youth in Liangjiahe. Confronted with material and natural resource scarcity, particularly the lack of fuel during harsh winters, Xi became acutely aware of ecological challenges. In 1974, as the Party secretary of Liangjiahe village, he led villagers in constructing the first biogas digester in northern Shaanxi. This not only provided clean energy for cooking and lighting but also mitigated pollution caused by burning wood.

In 1985, as the Party secretary of Zhengding County in Hebei Province, Xi proposed several measures to protect the environment, such as maintaining ecological balance during resource development and controlling pollution sources. During his tenure as Party secretary of Zhejiang Province, Xi made a historic visit to Yucun Village in Anji County, Huzhou, on August 15, 2005, where he first proposed the renowned "Two Mountains Theory", stating, "We strive for harmony between humanity and nature, and between economy and society. Simply put, we need two mountains: gold and silver mountains, and green mountains and clear waters'. He argued that while these two goals may appear contradictory, they can be reconciled through dialectical unity, reflecting the Marxist principle of dialectical reasoning.It scientifically reveals the laws governing economic and social development, fully embodying the green philosophy of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

In 2020, on the 15th anniversary of the "Two Mountains Theory", Xi Jinping visited Zhejiang, Shaanxi, and Shanxi, highlighting ecological prioritization and green development. He advanced the idea of "man does not disappoint the green mountains, and the green mountains will not disappoint man", enriching the theoretical foundation of ecological civilization in the new era.

The "Two Mountains Theory" has evolved into Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought, which has propelled China's ecological civilization construction to globally recognized achievements. A roadmap has been established: by 2035, fundamental improvements in ecological quality will be realized, with the "Beautiful China" goal essentially achieved; by mid-century, a fully developed "Beautiful China" will be completed. Guided by Xi Jinping's ecological civilization thought, the

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modernization of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature will undoubtedly take root and flourish across China.

3. THE PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION THOUGHT WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

The practical application of ecological civilization thought focuses on harmonizing economic growth with environmental protection, transforming theoretical insights into actionable strategies. By embedding ecological principles into policy-making and governance, this framework addresses real-world environmental challenges and integrates sustainability into the fabric of Chinese-style modernization. Practical measures prioritize systemic planning, public welfare, and sustainable development as the foundation for building a "Beautiful China".

3.1 A Good Ecological Environment Is the Most Inclusive Public Welfare

The relationship between humanity and nature is the most fundamental relationship in human society. Nature serves as the provider of all material life, forming the foundation and prerequisite for the emergence, existence, and development of human society. While humans can purposefully transform and utilize nature through social practices, they remain an integral part of nature and cannot dominate it. Exploiting nature without giving back, using it without building or restoring, or adopting unsustainable methods such as "killing the goose that lays the golden eggs" will ultimately harm humanity itself. Protecting the natural environment is synonymous with protecting humanity; building ecological civilization benefits all of humankind.

From a historical perspective, the prosperity of civilizations has been closely tied to ecological health, while ecological degradation has often precipitated the decline of civilizations. This principle transcends human will. Many ancient civilizations, such as those in Mesopotamia, Greece, and Anatolia, thrived in regions with favorable ecological conditions but ultimately declined due to severe ecological damage. In their quest for arable land, these societies deforested vast areas, rendering once-prosperous regions barren. As noted, "We must not become overly intoxicated with humanity's triumphs over nature... as we often undo the initial results ourselves" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Communist Party of China, 2017, pp. 10–11). Respecting, revering, and adhering to nature's objective laws are essential for maintaining the balance between humanity and nature. Only by understanding nature as the fundamental basis for human survival and development can we ensure sustainable ecological benefits for human society.

Since the reform and opening-up period, the Communist Party of China has consistently prioritized ecological civilization by adopting environmental protection and resource conservation as basic state policies. Notable progress has been made. However, after over three decades of rapid economic development, China faces an increasing prevalence of ecological problems, such as water system pollution, groundwater contamination, soil pollution from heavy metals, and air quality issues like smog. These environmental challenges disrupt the harmony between humanity and nature, adversely affect public health, and threaten the well-being of future generations. The societal repercussions are significant, even sparking social unrest.

These issues highlight a shift in public demand from basic survival to ecological well-being, including clean water, fresh air, safe food, and beautiful environments. Ecological protection is an intergenerational endeavor, essential not only for the current population but also for the long-term development of the Chinese nation. Xi Jinping has aptly stated, "A good ecological environment is the most equitable public good and the most inclusive public welfare". This ecological vision has driven significant achievements in environmental governance, such as the ecological restoration in Xishuangbanna, where improved conditions have led to the return of Asian elephants, and the ten-year fishing ban in the Yangtze River, resulting in a resurgence of the Yangtze finless porpoise population. Consequently, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the importance of prioritizing "harmony between humanity and nature" to ensure widespread understanding and implementation of this principle.

3.2 Protecting the Ecological Environment Is Protecting Productivity

On May 24, 2013, during the sixth collective study session of the 18th Central Politburo, Xi Jinping asserted, "We must properly balance economic development and ecological protection, firmly establish the concept that protecting the ecological environment is protecting productivity, and improving the ecological environment is developing productivity. We must consciously promote green, circular, and low-carbon development, and never sacrifice the environment for temporary economic growth" (Xi, 2018, p. 209).

This critical statement underscores the intrinsic connection between environmental protection and productivity development, representing a significant advancement in production theory. It exemplifies a value system that respects nature and seeks harmonious development between humanity and nature. This approach starkly contrasts with the Western model of "pollution first, remediation later". Many developed countries have experienced severe ecological consequences as a result of industrialization. For instance, London was long known as a "foggy city", and environmental disasters like the 1930 Meuse Valley smog in Belgium and the mid-20th century photochemical smog in Los Angeles serve as cautionary tales (Xi, 2017, p. 544). These nations created substantial material wealth during rapid industrialization but paid a heavy ecological price, offering sobering lessons for future development.

In China, economic growth has been the primary focus since the reform and opening-up period. While progress has been made in energy conservation and emission reduction, issues persist in certain areas where resources are over-exploited, and the

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environment is damaged to drive economic growth. Challenges such as dwindling energy resources, desertification, soil erosion, and rising greenhouse gas emissions must be addressed to ensure sustainable development. Without corrective measures, these problems will constrain China's economic prospects, deplete resources, and overwhelm the ecological system.

China's unique circumstances—limited energy resources and constrained ecological carrying capacity—demand a different path from the "pollute first, clean up later" trajectory followed by Western nations. As a country with over 1.4 billion people, China cannot afford the traditional modernizing approach that prioritizes short-term gains over long-term sustainability. Instead, it must forge a new development path, leveraging the advantages of socialism with Chinese characteristics to integrate development and protection seamlessly.

This approach requires breaking away from the conventional dichotomy between environmental protection and productivity. By recognizing ecological health as a productive resource, respecting natural laws, and preserving the environment, China can achieve higher levels of development. This balance ensures the organic harmony between ecological modernization and large-scale modernization. Achieving this requires abandoning unsustainable practices, restructuring industries, improving resource utilization, and promoting green, circular, and low-carbon development. By constructing a modern ecological civilization that embodies "harmony between humanity and nature", China can achieve a win-win scenario of economic growth and environmental protection.

4. PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION THOUGHT WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

The implementation of ecological civilization hinges on strong governance systems and cultural awareness. Legal frameworks and institutional reforms must align with public participation to ensure ecological sustainability. This dual approach transforms not only policies but also societal values, fostering a shared commitment to harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. The synergy of institutional and cultural efforts provides a comprehensive pathway for sustainable development and global ecological leadership.

4.1 Cultivating Ecological Awareness through Culture

Chinese-style modernization is not only about harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature but also about the coordinated development of spiritual and material civilization. Ideas precede actions, just as theory underpins practice. The formation of any concept requires prolonged immersion and subtle influence. Thus, constructing a new era of ecological civilization begins with reshaping people's perceptions, fostering a deep-rooted awareness of environmental protection among the public, and promoting a social ethos of respect and care for nature. First, ecological civilization-themed education should be widely conducted across society. By comparing the environmental changes before and after protection efforts, people can more intuitively perceive the effectiveness of governance and understand the importance and necessity of sustainable ecological development. Next, community-based environmental protection campaigns should be initiated, encouraging citizens to participate in activities such as neighborhood beautification and waste sorting. These activities help individuals recognize their role in ecological governance, bridging the gap between the public and ecological civilization efforts. Finally, strengthening ecological morality and related laws and regulations is essential. Ecological ethics should align with legal frameworks, as morality represents the baseline for every citizen, and laws provide foundational support for ecological ethics. Together, they enhance citizens' awareness of ecological civilization and contribute to the creation of a Beautiful China.

4.2 Regulating Behavior with the Strictest Environmental Protection Systems

Many prominent issues in China's environmental protection efforts stem from incomplete systems, inadequate mechanisms, and insufficient legal frameworks. The communique of the 20th Central Committee's Third Plenary Session emphasized that Chinese-style modernization requires building a sound ecological civilization system. Constructing ecological civilization entails a revolutionary transformation involving production methods, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and value systems. Achieving such transformative change demands a comprehensive system of ecological civilization regulations to protect the environment and advance its construction. Xi Jinping underscored, "Only by implementing the strictest systems and the most rigorous rule of law can we reliably guarantee the construction of ecological civilization" (Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Communist Party of China, 2014, p. 104).

Since the 18th National Congress, China has introduced numerous reforms and regulations, establishing the "four pillars and eight beams" of the ecological civilization framework. The vitality of any system lies in its enforcement, which hinges on rigorous oversight and accountability. First, ecological protection should be prioritized within the evaluation system for socioeconomic development. A scientific evaluation system serves as a "compass" for ecological civilization efforts. Moving beyond the traditional focus on GDP, indicators such as resource consumption, environmental damage, and ecological benefits must be integrated into development assessments. A system tailored to the goals of ecological civilization should include objectives, evaluation criteria, and reward-punishment mechanisms. Second, a lifetime accountability system for environmental damage must be established. Resources and the environment are public goods, and reckless decision-making that harms them cannot be condoned. Leadership accountability is crucial; those responsible for environmental damage must face consequences, including lifetime liability. Third, robust resource and environmental management systems must be implemented. As urbanization, industrialization, and lifestyle changes continue, environmental degradation remains an ongoing challenge.

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Addressing this requires effective management frameworks, including land-use planning, conservation areas, restoration systems for water, air, soil, forests, and wetlands, environmental monitoring and early warning systems, resource-use compensation mechanisms, and environmental damage compensation systems.

4.3 Enhancing Public Welfare through a Pristine Environment

Nature, as humanity's inorganic body, is the foundation of human existence. The ecological environment is irreplaceable; its loss is irreversible. It directly impacts people's quality of life and societal stability. When well-maintained, it enhances public happiness and satisfaction; when degraded, it causes ecological and economic harm, jeopardizes livelihoods, and poses risks to societal stability. Xi Jinping's profound reflections on ecological civilization have guided its practice, aligning with socioeconomic development laws and addressing public expectations. He stressed, "A good ecological environment is the most equitable public good and the most inclusive public welfare", advocating for the protection of the environment as one would safeguard their eyesight or life. Efforts must focus on key areas, including continuing the battles for clean air, water, and soil to reduce pollution and carbon emissions and improve environmental quality; strengthening water pollution control and water environment governance to ensure water quality; managing soil pollution risks to secure safe land use; and enhancing rural living conditions and infrastructure while promoting environmentally conscious habits and building eco-friendly, livable villages. Most importantly, addressing prominent environmental issues that endanger public health is critical. Creating a pristine ecological environment enhances public well-being and fulfills societal aspirations.

As a Chinese proverb reflects, "The clear breeze and bright moon are priceless; near waters and distant mountains are deeply felt". The modernization China seeks is one of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Public demand for clean water, green food, fresh air, and a beautiful environment reflects their aspirations for a better life and is central to resolving current social challenges. The next five years are crucial for building a Beautiful China. Achieving this vision requires studying and comprehending ecological civilization thought with Chinese characteristics, adhering to the principles of prioritizing ecology and environmental protection, and practicing new development concepts without wavering. Zero tolerance for environmental destruction and abandoning unsustainable development models is essential. By centering development on the people, ensuring blue skies, green mountains, clear waters, and more beautiful surroundings, ecological well-being can become a growth engine for people's lives, a pillar of sustainable socioeconomic development, and a showcase of China's exemplary image. These efforts will usher in a new era of ecological civilization construction.

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