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Ecological Discourse and Ecological Risk in China

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Abstract This paper will outline three sources of ecological discourse for the defence of ‘ecological civilisation’ and ‘ecological Marxism’ and the promotion of an ‘ecologically civilised society’: in response to ecological risk in China: the official, governmental ecological discourse (official think tanks, ministry documents); the formal academic, nongovernmental ecological discourse (academics, advisers, opinion-makers); the informal nongovernmental or emergent civil society ecological discourse (social movements, protest movements, critical analysis of risk and governmental policy). The working hypothesis of this study is that, even though awareness of ecological risk and the need for an ‘ecologically civilised society’ is high among the emergent civil society, the ministry advisers and policy-makers, and the opinion-makers, the management of ecological risk is hampered by contradictory priorities and criteria in the meritocratic evaluation of performance by government and Party officials, on the one hand, and the need to generate wealth, on the other. This debate is analogous to the debate on efficiency (the generation of wealth) and equity (the redistribution of wealth) in the field of economic planning and performance, and a symptom of the increasing complexity of competing and contradictory priorities as the nature of Chinese modernisation evolves.


Keywords Chinese ecological discourse. Ecological Marxism. Ecologically civilised society. Ecological risk in China. Chinese modernisation.

Pollution is a major issue in China today, a source of popular discontent on a widespread level, which ranks with systematic corruption as one the most important threats to the stability of the political system. The government had to issue ‘red alerts’ in Beijing twice at the end of 2015 because of the excessive levels of air pollution. Both Prime Minister Li Keqiang 李克强 and President Xi Jinping 习近平 have stated that controlling pollution has the government’s highest priority. For 2016 the government has revised the levels of pollution that would trigger a red alert, from the present air quality index of 200 micrograms of PM2.5 per cubic metre for three days in a row to an excess of 500 for one day, 300 for two days in a row or 200 for four days. By extending these criteria to include Beijing, Tianjin and four cities in Hebei province, the government has also imposed pollution controls on a more widespread area. The violation of existing legislation for control of the storage of dangerous chemicals caused a major disaster in Tianjin. At the same time, China contributed positively to the achievement of consensus for the Paris Agreement on the reduction of climate

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change. Ecological risk is very high in China and it requires management. A discourse analysis of the defence of 'ecological civilisation' or 'ecological Marxism' in China – and of the subsequent management of ecological risk in China – reveals how the construction of a discourse on ecological risk has become an area fraught with difficulties as a result of the incompatibility of diverse strategies and priorities.

This study will analyse three sources of discourse for the defence of 'ecological civilisation' or 'ecological Marxism' in response to ecological risk in China and its subsequent management:

- official, governmental ecological discourse (official think tanks, ministry documents);
- formal academic, nongovernmental ecological discourse (academics, advisers, opinion-makers);
- informal nongovernmental or emergent civil society ecological discourse (social movements, protest movements, critical analysis of risk and governmental policy).

The working hypothesis of this study is that, even though awareness of ecological risk is high among emergent civil society, ministry advisers, policy-makers and opinion-makers, the management of ecological risk is hampered by contradictory priorities and criteria in the meritocratic evaluation of performance by government and Party officials, on the one hand, and the need to generate wealth, on the other. This debate is analogous to the debate on 'efficiency' (the generation of wealth) and 'equity' (social justice, the redistribution of wealth) in the field of economic planning and performance.

When he was President (2002-2012), Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 promoted 'the construction of ecological civilisation' (生态文明 建设 *shēngtài wénmíng jiànshè*) as a key element of his 'scientific development concept' (科学发展观 *kēxué fāzhǎn guān*) in the context of 'people-centred development' (以人为本 *yǐrén wéiběn*) – a concept that opposes development that would benefit the people to development as an end in itself. On the one hand, uncontrolled environmental contamination generates serious economic costs that threaten the modernisation of the economy; on the other, environmental degradation generates social protest (or 'instability', in governmental terms). Thus, a far-seeing environmental policy would contribute to the construction of a 'harmonious society' (和谐社会 *héxié shèhuì*). This would require 'coordinated and comprehensive sustainable development' (全面协调可持续 *quánmiàn xiétiáo kěchíxù*), meaning that the various dimensions of development (economic, political, cultural and social) should be coordinated – with environmental preservation as a priority – as well as balancing development in order to reduce disparities between the city and the countryside, between regions, between economic and social development, between human soci-

ety and nature, between domestic development and foreign trade, between centralism and decentralisation (Hu 2007).

The construction of a discourse defining ‘ecological civilisation’ (生态文明 *shēngtài wénmíng*) or ‘ecological Marxism’ (生态马克思主义 *shēngtài mǎkèsī zhǔyì*) fits into the strategy that Deng Xiaoping began in 1978 of constructing a new ideological outlook – an ‘ecologically civilised society’ (生态文明社會 *shēngtài wénmíng shèhuì*) in this case – that would replace radical Maoism in order to justify his substitution of ‘reforms and opening up’ (改革开放 *gaige kaifang*) for Maoist autarchy and egalitarianism.

Deng’s ‘two civilisations’ program (*liangge wenming* 两个文明), which differentiates between ‘material civilisation’ (*wuzhi wenming* 物质文明) and ‘spiritual civilisation’ (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明), constitutes the core of his ideological framework. In this program, Deng Xiaoping drew an ideological line in his clear separation of two civilisations for the Chinese: ‘material civilisation’ refers to economic growth led by market development and mass consumption, while ‘spiritual civilisation’, which can be understood as the ‘civilising of minds’, consists in a set of moral standards and practices such as hard work, abnegation, patriotism and trust in the Party, and therefore requests Chinese people to be morally beyond reproach. Right from its beginning, this ‘civilising of minds’ involved a single purpose, that of accompanying the growth and development of ‘material civilisation’, configuring and adapting minds to the new rules and socio-economic practices deriving from capitalist economies. (Boutonnet 2011, 79-80)

This is, of course, ‘civilisation’ (文明 *wénmíng*) ‘with Chinese characteristics,’ the construction of a specific imaginary/ideology that would justify and lend legitimacy to government policy, not the promotion of ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’ *per se*. As Raymond Williams pointed out in *Keywords* (1983), in modern European languages, both of these terms have their etymological origins in ‘cultivation’ in the context of agriculture and of animal breeding but evolved into ‘Culture’ and ‘Civilisation’ in parallel with the profound alienation that accompanied industrialisation in Europe. The connotations in Chinese come from a different context, especially in the case of ‘culture’ (文化 *wénhuà*), a composite term that includes the concept of ‘transformation’ (化 *huà*). There are extensive and contrastive discussions of the different meanings and connotations of 文明 *wénmíng* and 文化 *wénhuà* in the Chinese context in works by Zhang Weiwei (2012) and Barbara Cassin et al. (2004, 2014). The *China-Europe Cultural Compass* quotes Hao Xiajun to contrast the Chinese from the European connotations: “In ancient Chinese texts, culture refers to civil administration and education. In a broader sense, culture embodies the capacity of material and spiritual production as well as all material and spiritual products” (EUNIC n.d., 17).

Party and government discourse now speaks of four civilisations that configure ‘socialism’ (社会主义 *shèhuìzhǔyì*):

- ‘material civilisation’ (物质文明 *wùzhì wénmíng*: the economy);
- ‘spiritual civilisation’ (精神文明 *jīngshén wénmíng*: culture);
- ‘political civilisation’ (政治文明 *zhèngzhì wénmíng*: democracy, rule-based governance);
- ‘ecological civilisation’ (生态文明 *shēngtài wénmíng*: clean and pleasing environment).

‘Nature’ generally plays a secondary role in most schools of classical Chinese thought because they emphasised ethics, the ordering of society and civic discourse, except in the case of Daoist thinkers who looked to the natural world for a realm where each being or thing could act in accordance with its own 道 *dào* and there was no need for any overriding teleological force to impose an order on them. The Confucians tended to look to Nature for analogies to justify social norms (e.g. 本末 *běnmò* ‘roots and branches’: just as branches were subordinated to roots, so should subjects be subordinated to rulers). There are, however, celebrated cases of a certain ‘ecological’ awareness. From Daoism and popular culture came concepts such as 度 *dù* ‘degree’ or ‘restraint’, 道 *dào* ‘the way of things’, 风水 *fēngshuǐ* ‘geomancy of the land(scape)’, 山水 *shānshuǐ* ‘mountains and water’ (the generic term for landscape), 风流 *fēngliú* ‘wind and river,’ following the flow. The Confucians banked on 礼 *lǐ* norms and customs, including 孝 *xiào*, a hierarchy of social obligations, to keep order, if not harmony, in society. For the Daoists, these were examples of 为 *wèi*, of an artificial way of doing things (i.e. based on artifice), as opposed to doing things according to their nature, a form of intervention that did not respect the nature of things. The graphic etymology of the written character in figure 1 - 为 *wèi* in its traditional form - makes this clear: an elephant 象 *xiàng* and a hand 手 *shǒu* guiding it:



Figure 1. The graphic etymology of 为 *wèi*

This visual metaphor represents a complex perspective on what is natural. The elephant is a huge and powerful animal, much stronger than the

human hand that guides it, yet wild elephants can be domesticated and transformed into tame animals that perform tasks assigned by humans. They are no longer wild in this case, yet humans, aware of the 道 *dào* of elephants, understand that their natural strength can be exploited for the benefit of human social ends because the nature (道 *dào*) of elephants allows them to be domesticated. Using domesticated animals to work the fields in agriculture suits the natural human need to produce food. Of course, for anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, the difference between ‘raw’ (and therefore ‘natural’) and ‘cooked’ (and therefore ‘artificial’, i.e. ‘cultural’) – or between ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ – is precisely the frontier between *nature* and *culture* (Lévi-Strauss 1964).

The domestication of plants and animals transformed nature but had to respect the ways of nature in order to do so. Otherwise it would have failed. This required understanding of the 道 *dào* as well as minimal interference in the 道 *dào* in order to let things run their course. The 道德经 *Dàodéjīng* uses the example of horses to make the difference clear: 天下有道，卻走馬以糞。天下無道，戎馬生于郊。禍莫大于不知足 *Tiānxià yǒudào, què zǒumǎ yǐ fèn. Tiānxià wúdào, róngmǎ shēngyú jiāo. Huò mòdà yú bù zhīzú*: when everything beneath the sky respects 道 *dào*, work horses manure the fields (or work the fields); when nothing beneath the sky respects 道 *dào*, war horses are reared outside the city walls; no greater misfortune than insatiable greed.

Overstepping the bounds of the 道 *dào* became 为 *wèi*, and upset the ecological balance, of nature and of society, and led to disaster. So the Daoists preached 无为 *wúwéi* or non-interference, not to be understood as doing nothing, however, but rather to be understood as avoiding artificial interference in order to allow things to run their natural course: 无为而无不为 *wúwéi ér wúbùwéi* do not interfere but do not do nothing or do nothing and that way let everything get done. Even so, Mèngzǐ 孟子 (Mencius, 372-289 BC), a Confucian, gave a well-known example of the danger involved in interfering with the 道 *dào* of things:

Do not be like the man from Song (Sung). Among the people of the state of Song there was one who, concerned lest his grain not grow, pulled on it. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, “Today I am worn out. I helped the grain to grow”. His son rushed out and looked at it. The grain was withered. Those in the world who do not help the grain to grow are few. Those who abandon it, thinking it will not help, are those who do not weed their grain. Those who help it grow are those who pull on the grain. Not only does this not help, but it even harms it. (Mengzi 2008, 40)

The Legalist Hánfēizǐ 韩非子 (280-233 BC) gave a striking example of ignorance of the 道 *dào* of things that has become an example of 成语

chéngyǔ, a genre of folk wisdom based on four-character sayings: 守株待兔 *shǒuzhūdàitù*, stand guard by the tree, wait for the rabbit. He tells the story of a farmer from the state of Song who saw a rabbit run so fast it crashed into a tree and died, and decided not to work the fields any more, but to wait by the tree every day for another rabbit to do the same. A late Confucianist, Wáng Yángmíng 王阳明 (1472-1529), proposed extending 仁 *rén* or 'empathy', the principle virtue of Confucianism, to the world of nature:

When one hears the cry of birds and animals, one will have compassion, because the [仁 *rén*] is one with the birds and animals. If one says that animals have senses, then one will have compassion when one sees the grasses and trees faded and broken, because the [仁 *rén*] is one with the grasses and animals. If you say that grasses and trees are animated beings, then one will regret when one sees tilestones collapse; this is because the [仁 *rén*] is one with tilestones. (Chan 1963, 182)

By contrast, as Lynn White pointed out, the ideology of the Judean-Christian tradition that subordinated nature to human usage provides the historical roots of the contemporary ecological crisis (White 1967; see Capra, Mattei 2016 for a contemporary approach to harmonising environmental science and law). Karl Marx's well-known eleventh *Thesis* on Feuerbach stated, "Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt drauf an, sie zu verändern", philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, what matters is *transforming* it (Marx 1845). Marx was defending *praxis* as opposed to theory in his *Theses*, getting one's hands dirty with the practical work of creation, such as the Biblical God creating humans. In the context of the industrial revolution in which Marx was immersed, this practical work could include the transformation of raw materials into products ("Er betrachtet daher im Wesen des Christentum nur das theoretische Verhalten als das echt menschliche, während die Praxis nur in ihrer schmutzig jüdischen Erscheinungsform gefaßt und fixiert wird", Marx 1845). A purely exploitative approach to nature is a key element of the modernity produced in Euroamerica by the modern scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, an element that China imported along with Marxism-Leninism.

Deeply influenced by Western modernity, China has predominantly accepted an anthropocentric worldview and values, which regard human beings as totally different from the world of natural things, and accordingly treats the world of nature as a world of objects. The value of natural things lies merely in being "used for our purpose". [...] This worldview and its resulting values have infiltrated the mainstream ideology of modern China, both in Mao's period and Deng's reform period.

For example, during Mao's regime, the lyrics of one of the most popular folk ballads included the lines:

In heaven there is no jade emperor [the supreme deity of Daoism],

On earth there is no dragon king [the rain god in Chinese mythology],

I am the jade emperor,

I am the dragon king.

Let the mountains make way, I am coming.

Since Deng's reform and opening-up period, an anthropocentric worldview and values have spread throughout China. For Pan Jiazheng, a scientist and former general engineer in the Ministry of Water Resources and Power [...] the Yangtze River has only economic value – its use lies merely in producing electricity for human beings. The river's irrigation of farmlands and woods, spiritual nourishment of people, and beautification of the earth for thousands of years is totally irrelevant to him. The influence of the anthropocentric worldview and values on modern China is so deep that even the purpose of the Environmental Protection Laws is defined as “safeguarding human health and facilitating the development of Socialist modernization”. [...] It is clear then that intrinsic to the law is an anthropocentric worldview, which “can no longer fulfill the needs of environmental protection”. [...] It cannot undertake the extremely important task of creating an ecological civilization. (Fan, He, Wang 2014)

Such a view has led to the current environmental crisis that now requires the creation of an ecologically civilised society. In 2007 *China Daily* reported that Hu Jintao's concept of ecological civilisation

reflects an important change in the Party's understanding of development. Rather than emphasizing economic construction as the core of development as it did in the past, the Party authorities have come to realize that development, if sustainable, must entail a list of elements including the right relationship between man and nature. (*China Daily* 2007)

In 2011 *Xinhuanet* reported that “China, the world's second largest economy, is stepping up its efforts to achieve ‘ecological civilization’” (*Xinhuanet* 2011), and the Chinese Ecological Civilization Research and Promotion Association was founded in a ceremony in the Great Hall of the People.

In their congratulation letters and written instructions, the Central leaders noted that to develop ecological civilization is a task of strategic significance to advancing the socialism cause with Chinese characteristics, and a definite requirement and major move to achieve science-based development; it is of relevance to the improvement of people's living

standards, the sustainable development, and the development of the Chinese nation in a long run. (MEP 2011)

Zhou Shengxian, the Minister of Environmental Protection of China, lent official weight to the project.

Environment and development go hand in hand. In nature, environmental issue is the issue of economic structure, production pattern and development path. Talking about environmental protection while ignoring economic development is like 'climbing a tree to catch a fish'. Talking about economic development while ignoring environmental protection is like «draining the pond to catch the fish». Right economic policy is the right environmental policy and vice versa. Green development is the reflection of right economic policies and environmental policies. Environmental protection has the role of 'guiding', 'optimizing' and 'expanding' economic development. 'Guiding' means clearly identifying ecological functions of the region and guiding the region and enterprises to develop the economy while bearing in mind what could be developed, encouraged, limited and prohibited. 'Optimizing' means utilization of the 'target driven mechanism' to facilitate industrial restructuring and shift of development mode. 'Expanding' means expansion of environmental carrying capacity by further promoting the pollutants emission reduction in order to create conditions for sustained economic development. Giving full play of the comprehensive role of environmental protection in optimizing economic development will strongly promote green development in China. (Zhou 2011)

Pan Yue, the Vice-Minister for Environmental Protection, appealed to traditional Chinese thought to justify contemporary environmental policy: "Longstanding Chinese ideals, which seek balance between man and nature, could help humans find a better way of living" (Pan 2011).

Traditional Chinese thought not only calls for the unity of man and nature, but provides the tools that allowed China to practice this principle for thousands of years. This is of great significance in the quest to solve today's financial and ecological crises.

For the past century, China has studied the west and followed the western path of industrialisation. And while three decades of reform and opening up have brought astounding economic achievements, China has also concentrated into those 30 years levels of pollution it took the west a century to create. (Pan 2011)

Pan identifies ecological ideological differences between the West and China.

China must not continue to follow in the footsteps of developed nations.

Instead, it should take time [to] re-examine western industrial civilisation and its own cultural traditions.

Western industrialism has its own characteristics and patterns. It is profit-driven and anthropocentric, runs on modern capitalism and is embodied in cities built on industry, commerce and finance. It has created great riches, but it has also done everything possible to shift its class, economic and social conflicts overseas. (Pan 2011)

From Pan's point of view, Western ecological ideology has led to ecological disaster and China should not make the same mistakes. Post-industrial societies can boast of and demand environmental protection because they have exported their pollution to newly industrialising countries through the relocation of industrial production. For Pan, China should look to its own cultural history to find new paths. China could offer a viable alternative.

However, industrial nations have found that they can export any kind of crisis except for one – the environmental crisis. Hurricanes hit both south-east Asia and New Orleans and rising sea levels will inundate both the small island nations of the Pacific and New York.

Faced with the inherent failings of western industrial civilisation, politicians and academics worldwide have started to re-examine the ecological wisdom of world cultures and ancient religions in search of solutions. In recent years, westerners with the necessary breadth of vision have turned to the east, and specifically to China. (Pan 2011)

Pan's arguments reflect the uneasy relationship between 'western' modernisation and 'Chinese' wisdom that has haunted China since the first Opium War imposed 'Western modernity' on China by force of arms, the dilemma defined by Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909) as the choice between preserving the Chinese cultural tradition as the Chinese essence and exploiting western culture for what it may offer that is useful (中学为体西学为用 *zhōngxué wèi tǐ xīxué wèi yòng*).

Although traditional Chinese culture is a product of an agricultural past, I firmly believe it contains universal values and can undergo a modern transformation.

The core of Chinese culture is the pursuit of the harmonious unity of man and nature. This value is expressed in actual institutions and lifestyles by the word *du* [度 *dù*, literally 'degree' or 'limit'] – the concept of restraint, temperance, etiquette, balance and harmony. *Du* is the art of propriety, the balance of moderation and suitability, the wisdom of standing in society and acquiring knowledge. It represents the wisdom of the Chinese not just in politics, but in life and in human interaction with the environment.

This wisdom exists not just in the writings of the sages, but is strongly rooted in family values and social customs, and this is one of the great things about the Chinese tradition. In traditional society, a single set of principles linked state institutions and policy with the common people and the privileged; and the classical texts and texts of the sages with the lives of the public and the official class. These doctrines or *dao* apply to anything from the management of a household and making tea to commerce, swordsmanship and even drinking and the underworld. (Pan 2011)

Despite Pan's insistence on the contrary, the introduction of concepts of integrated planning, harmonising environmental, economic, social and cultural concerns (which informs the idea of ecological civilisation, as well as of the scientific outlook on development) was to a large extent a by-product of intense exchange with the West throughout the reform era (Wang 1998). Furthermore, the history of exploitation of the environment in China and its consequent degradation right up through the Maoist era contradicts the Daoist idealisation of the harmony between human society and nature that Pan calls a core value of Chinese culture (cf. Economy 2004; Elvin 2004; Shapiro 2001, 2012). Simona A. Grano has edited a special issue of China Information on environmental governance that contributes more recent information and analysis on the topic (Grano 2016).

In the field of ecological thinking, as in many other fields of thought in contemporary China, a new political terminology, whose analysis can reveal contemporary tensions in social, economic and political policy-making, is emerging. The emergence of this discursive strategy with Chinese characteristics uses Chinese knowledge as the substance and western knowledge for practical purposes, and develops three premises:

1. Chinese traditional wisdom foresaw (and forestalled) current problems but failed to compete successfully with Western modernity.
2. China has tried the Western models and seen that they are doomed to failure - in the West as well as in China.
3. Chinese solutions based on renovating Chinese models will work for both China and the rest of the world.

One corollary of this line of reasoning is that China will recover its once (and future) pre-eminent role in the world order.

The academic world is a second source of ecological discourse. Lu Feng 卢风, a Tsinghua University philosophy professor, suggests that the era of industrial civilisation has ended, but insists that the creation of an 'ecological civilisation' (生态文明 *shēngtài wénmíng*) would require

nothing short of a 'civilization revolution 文明革命' [*wénmíng gémìng*] (in Chinese, just one character different from 'cultural revolution 文化革

命' [*wénhuà géming*]). In his view, it is necessary to overhaul the intellectual foundations on which our present industrial civilization, and our model of industrial development, are based. In his analysis, ecological civilization represents not just a development of the modern industrial paradigm, but a radical transformation.

This view was not universally held, however. [...] Chen Zhishang, a senior philosophy professor at Peking University [...] [t]rained in orthodox Marxist philosophy, and well connected within the Party [...] views ecological civilization more as a continuation of the materialist/humanist paradigm, but one that is reformed and extended to take the natural environment into account. (Miller 2010)

In his very influential economic analyses, Hu Angang 胡鞍钢 identified ecological threats – such as the shortage of water resources in Northern China, worsening environmental degradation, or the diversion of water from some southern rivers to the North – as factors that could generate negative GDP growth of 1%-2% (Hu 2003).¹

A third source of ecological discourse is what might be termed as 'default' civil society in China, an informal, nongovernmental or 'emergent' civil society that communicates ecological risk by means of social movements and the social media, despite the government's efforts to control the social media. Although prominent environmentalist authors such as Dai Qing 戴晴 and Wang Hui 汪晖 have been involved in environmental protest, structurally organised environmental protest movements with an identifiable leadership can be easily dismantled and rendered ineffective, but not amorphous rhizomatic networks. In the last few years, there have been a number of celebrated cases of successful mobilisation against specific governmental decisions on the location of ecologically risky installations. The first occurred in Xiàmén 厦门 in 2008. An anonymous SMS message started the movement.

"The Taiwan-funded Xianglu Group has begun building a PX plant. It's like an atomic bomb in Xiamen", read a text message that spread quickly in Xiamen at the end of May. "Many people will suffer leukemia and more babies will be born with congenital defects". [...] "A paraxylene project should be at least 100 kilometers from a major urban settlement, but we are only 16 km from the project. For the sake of our future generations, please forward the message to all your friends", it reads. At the end of the message, it also calls for Xiamen residents to demonstrate in the street on June 1 to protest the project.

1 For more detailed academic analyses of 'ecological civilisation' see Lu 2011; Keeley, Zheng 2011; Wang 2012; Wen et al. 2012; Miller 2013; Fan, He, Wang 2014.

Even now the source of the original text message is still a mystery. (Xinhua 2008)

Since then, similar incidents have proliferated. Barry van Wyck offered “a quick run-down of the notable environmental ‘not in my backyard’ (NIMBY) protests in China in recent years, leading up to last week’s Ningbo [宁波] protest”:

- June 2007: anti-PX march in Xiamen against the planned construction of a toxic chemical plant in the city. An environmental assessment is ordered to determine the effects that the plant would have on the surrounding area.
- January 2008: thousands of Shanghai residents protest against a proposed extension of the high-speed magnetic levitation ‘Maglev’ train.
- May 2008: 400-500 residents of Chengdu in Sichuan province protest a 5.5\$ billion ethylene plant under construction by PetroChina.
- August 2008: Beijing residents protest against the city’s biggest dump site that they claim is polluting the air with a foul stench and dangerous dioxins.
- August 2011: a chemical plant in Dalian in Liaoning province is closed down after thousands of protesters confront riot police, demanding that the plant be shut down due to safety concerns.
- July 2012: protests in the city of Shifang in Sichuan province result in the cancellation of a copper project.
- July 2012: tens of thousands of protesters in Qidong near Shanghai protest a sewage pipeline at a paper factory. Plans for the pipeline are shelved. (van Wyk 2012)

The Ningbo protest was a clear example of informal or default civil society action in the age of information.

Ningbo was the scene last week for protests by residents of the city against a multi-billion yuan expansion project of an oil refinery and chemical plant by the Zhenhai Refining and Chemical Company, a subsidiary of the Chinese petrochemical giant Sinopec. Thousands of people took part in the protest against the project, which they believed would be spewing out more paraxylene, or PX, a hazardous hydrocarbon. Then on Sunday, following a meeting of the Ningbo city government, an official statement announced that the PX project would not go ahead. (van Wyck 2012)

The possibility of grass-roots social movements successfully changing government policy is a matter of great concern for the Party and the government. Even though both the Party and the government promote and defend ecological civilisation, their Leninist legacy can neither contemplate nor

tolerate the possibility of political movements being organised beyond their control. The frontier between legitimately claiming one's rights, on the one hand, and 'social instability' (社会不安定 *shèhuì bù āndìng*) or 'mass incidents' (群体性事件 *qúntǐ xìng shìjiàn*) on the other is quite blurred because the highest priority is given to 'the preservation of social stability' (维稳 *wéiwěn*, an abbreviation of 维护稳定 *wéihù wěndìng*).

One of the most interesting dynamics we see again in the Ningbo PX case is the face-off between social media and 'stability preservation,' in recent years the Party's most robust method of dealing with social instability.

Rapid economic development in the absence of transparent and inclusive institutions in China has generated an upswell of social unrest. Party leaders have tried to balance this equation with massive spending on 'stability preservation', the mobilizing of domestic security forces against the population. But in some sense, social media are now upsetting this equation. Thanks largely to social media, the tactics of 'stability preservation' are increasingly under scrutiny. (Bandurski 2012)

The local Ningbo newspaper was bold enough to editorialise the incident.

Even though this issue has now been resolved, another related issue for us to consider now is whether incidents like these can be resolved before-hand. Because of the problem with PX, this same mass incident have already occurred in Xiamen, Dalian and other cities, and there is no way that Ningbo didn't know about these incidents in other cities. [...] This event has just reminded all government departments again that important policies must take public opinion into account early on with a smooth and unhindered process. If this does not happen it might result in unpredictable and costly consequences. Even though the projects at Xiamen, Dalian and Qidong were all different, they all point to the same reality: pay attention to the environment or risk alienating public opinion. (van Wyck 2012)

The current *status quo* between government attempts to 'preserve stability' and emergent or default civil society amorphous and rhizomatic attempts to influence public policy seems to be a stand-off.

"Today we're seeing really for the first time, the old 100 names [the ordinary people], able to articulate their ideas in a kind of public sphere", says Kaiser Kuo, now a spokesman for Baidu, China's largest internet search engine.

Internet penetration is only about 40%, he acknowledges, but that 40% does now include a lot of people who have very ordinary jobs in cities or small towns, and even some villagers.

“Their voices are now heard, in cyberspace at least”, says Kuo. “And that has come to function as a kind of public spirit, that China has never in its very long history actually had.

“I think that this is absolutely unprecedented, and it has given the Chinese leadership itself a vantage point, on the feelings of ordinary citizens that I think perhaps has made it a more responsive and deliberative and participatory leadership”. (Gracie 2012)

How blurry the frontier is was demonstrated in a very public way in 2015 by the fate of the documentary film *Under the Dome* (穹顶之下 *Qióngdǐng zhī xià*) by Chái Jìng 柴静.

The authorities in China have removed from websites a popular documentary which highlights the country’s severe pollution problem.

Under the Dome explains the social and health costs of pollution, and was watched by more than 100 million people online, sparking debates.

It was removed just two days after Premier Li Keqiang called pollution a blight on people’s lives.

Mr Li had promised to fight it with all the government’s might. [...]

The newly appointed environmental protection minister, Chen Jining, had praised *Under The Dome*, telling reporters it should “encourage efforts by individuals to improve air quality”.

But having initially praised the documentary, China’s communist leaders now seem to have banned it. [...]

Willy Lam, a political analyst at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, said: “They are really serious about this except the problem is really entrenched.

“It is intertwined with all aspects of industry and agriculture and so forth, and it’s a really difficult problem to tackle”. (*BBC News* 2015)

The (mis)management of ecological risk is due precisely to the fact that environmental protection is intertwined with all aspects of industry and agriculture and the provision of energy. It is part and parcel of the structural problem generated by the Leninist legacy of the political system. The same debate that opposes ‘efficiency’ (the generation of wealth) to ‘equity’ (social justice, the redistribution of the wealth created) opposes ‘efficiency’ to ‘ecology’. The meritocracy rewards efficiency. Environmental protection requires control over industry, including limitations on pollution and factoring in the cost of environmental protection. Ecological concerns interfere with the creation of wealth. This was made clear in the case of the Xiamen incident.

According to the *Southern People Weekly*, some local officials still feel regret regarding the project’s possible relocation, because it means a

loss of possible GDP growth, a factor that still important when assessing local officials.

“Xiamen is the second biggest city in Fujian, but its GDP is lower than the third biggest city -- Quanzhou. This puts great pressure on officials in Xiamen. All the cities in China are pursuing quick GDP growth and Xiamen is no exception”, said Xu Guodong, a professor with the Law School at Xiamen University. (China.org.cn 2008)

In such circumstances, the enforcement of environmental protection standards could come at the cost of one’s own career (Ran 2009). At the same time, any movement toward greater transparency in the decision-making process or in policy-making – a vital prerequisite for informed citizen participation in these processes – could be seen as a threat to stability. Citizens’ response to this situation takes place through the social media, despite government’s efforts at control. There are informal media and there are official media. The official media promote the official line of the Party and the government. The official line also uses the social media. Chinese netizens have created the derogatory term ‘fifty-cent party (or faction or army)’ (五毛党 *wǔmáo dǎng*) to describe people who promote the official line through posts on the social media, allegedly being paid a small amount per post. So the Party and the government are caught on the horns of another dilemma: to protect citizens’ rights (by giving priority to rules-based governance, 法治 *fǎzhì*) or to preserve stability (control power, 维稳 *wéiwěn*).

At this stage in the period of transition from rule by a Party with a Leninist legacy toward rule by a governing party (Golden 2014, 2015), the problem has now become a trilemma. The Party and the State, which are basically isomorphic, must negotiate and/or arbitrate the often contradictory demands of Society and of the Market. The construction of an ecological discourse or an ecological civilisation or an ecological Marxism or an ecologically civilised society responds to a need felt by almost all sectors of society and government. Climate change and environmental degradation are manifest problems in China. The response to ecological risk is both ideational and legislative, but the structural problems endemic to both industrialisation and the Leninist legacy impede the translation of an ecological discourse into ecological policies. China is certainly not alone in this problematical situation and perhaps Lu Feng is right to call for a ‘civilisation revolution’ (文明革命 *wénmíng gé mìng*) in order to transform ‘ecological civilisation’ (生态文明 *shēngtài wénmíng*) into the solution to ecological risk.

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