China and the Struggle for Ecological Civilization

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Introduction: Ecological Civilization as the Successor to Capitalism?

“Ecological civilization” has multiple resonances by virtue of both each word and their conjunction. “Ecology” challenges the basic assumptions not only of mainstream science but the basic assumptions on which capitalism is based. ‘Civilization’, a much older term, is a reaffirmation of a vision of a life to be fought for and a condemnation of barbarity and decadence. “Civilization” also draws attention to the highest social forms being achievements, and the fragility of these achievements – that civilizations can and do collapse. “Ecological civilization” enables us to clarify the meaning of civilization, to bring into focus the decadent barbarism of late capitalism, and to envisage more clearly it transcendence (Gare, 2010a). It enables socialists to revive a realistic and inspiring vision of a future beyond capitalism while freeing them from the baggage of Stalinism in all its varieties. Ecological civilization provides a new vision of the future that can capture people’s imaginations and mobilize them for the required transformation.

The notion of ‘ecological civilization’ was actually coined in the Soviet Union in 1984, but it was in China that it was taken up, developed and vigorously and successfully promoted, most importantly by Pan Yue, the Vice-minister of China's State Environmental Protection Administration. In November 2007 “ecological civilization” was embraced as a central policy objective by the Chinese government. Since then the Chinese government has massively increased expenditure on technology to ameliorate environmental damage and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, sponsored numerous conferences on ecological civilization and promoted the idea internationally. It appears that China is a rising power in the world still claiming to be socialist, while the ruling elites of Anglophone countries, who appear to have been the winners in the struggle for world power, have so effectively empowered transnational corporations and so successfully disempowered their own populations by fostering their decadence that they have undermined the basis for their own power. As a rising power, China’s future is open. The rise to power of China associated with the decline of the West suggests grounds for optimism that this rise will be associated with China’s promotion of ecological civilization globally, which ultimately will involve the creation of some kind of eco-socialist socio-economic formation or formations to succeed capitalism (see Gare 2010b).

There are a number of problems with this optimistic scenario. Not all ecologists share the same view of ecology, and the notion of civilization is even more problematic. It has connotations of the celebration of the city over rural life, which many environmentalists see as one of the major causes of ecological destruction. However, it is the place of China in this vision of the future that raises the most

1 On the history of the notion of ecological civilization, see Xu Chun (Xu Chun, 2009, 158f.).
questions. It is not only that the Chinese define ecological civilization as the successor to industrial civilization rather than capitalism that raises questions about what kind of future they are promoting. As eco-socialists have engaged with Chinese proponents of ecological civilization the enigmatic nature of what is happening in China and in its relation to other countries has had to be faced. What we find in China is a country that has embraced neoliberal capitalism while calling itself communist and has created one of the most inegalitarian and most environmental destructive economies in the world while promoting ecological civilization. This raises questions about the sincerity of the Chinese government in its commitment to ecological civilization, whether it is genuinely committed to this (or simply promoting this as a form of national public relations), and if so, does it conceive it as anything more than an adjustment to a managed capitalist world-order? This in turn raises questions about the Chinese proponents of ecological civilization. Where do they stand on such issues? And where do they stand in relation to their government and its policies? This has left those outside China who have embraced the idea of ecological civilization uncertain about their relation to China and Chinese environmentalists and what should they do next. For this reason it is necessary to look more closely at China and Chinese environmentalism.

Understanding the Push for Ecological Civilization in China

The most obvious place to begin any examination of the potential of China to foster a global ecological civilization is with Pan Yue. Pan Yue has been able to sum up succinctly the situation of China and the role China could and should play in the future. He described the situation in China in 2005 in an interview with *Der Spiegel*:

> To produce goods worth $10,000, for example, we need seven times more resources than Japan, nearly six times more than the United States and, perhaps most embarrassing, nearly three times more than India. ... Our raw materials are scarce, we don't have enough land, and our population is constantly growing. Currently, there are 1.3 billion people living in China, that's twice as many as 50 years ago. In 2020, there will be 1.5 billion people in China. Cities are growing but desert areas are expanding at the same time; habitable and usable land has been halved over the past 50 years. Acid rain is falling on one third of the Chinese territory, half of the water in our seven largest rivers is completely useless, while one fourth of our citizens does not have access to clean drinking water. One third of the urban population is breathing polluted air, and less than 20 percent of the trash in cities is treated and processed in an environmentally sustainable manner. Finally, five of the ten most polluted cities worldwide are in China. ... Because air and water are polluted, we are losing between 8 and 15 percent of our gross domestic product. And that doesn't include the costs for health. Then there's the human suffering: In Beijing alone, 70 to 80 percent of all deadly cancer cases are related to the environment. Lung cancer has emerged as the No. 1 cause of death. ... Even now, the western regions of China and the country's ecologically stressed regions can no longer support the people already living there. In the future, we will need to resettle 186 million residents from 22 provinces and cities. However, the other provinces and cities can only absorb some 33 million people. That means China will have more than 150 million ecological migrants, or, if you like, environmental refugees (Pan 2005).  

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2 This characterization of the disastrous state of the China’s environment concurs with the findings of Economy, 2004 and Watts, 2010.
Pan Yue calls for a “green GDP” which, by taking into account environmental destruction, would show that China’s supposed economic growth is a mirage. His agenda was and is genuinely radical. He claims that the fundamental cause of the global environmental crisis is capitalism. To deal with it, a major reorientation by the Chinese government is required, using state power to overcome vested interests and the powers that support them while at the same time empowering the general population (Pan 2006a). China’s environmental challenge will only be met through public participation in decision-making, Pan argues (Pan 2006c). People need to be informed about the true situation and freed to mobilize to deal with environmental problems. As he continued:

> Political co-determination should be part of any socialist democracy. I want more discussions with the people affected. However, I am not one to put on a show just to look democratic to the outside. We need a law that enables and guarantees public participation, especially when it comes to environmental projects. If it’s safe politically to get involved and help the environment, then all sides will benefit. We must try to convince the central leadership of that (Pan 2005).

Pan Yue’s vision extends beyond China. Noting that the Chinese have to face up to their ecological crisis because there is nowhere else for them to go, that Chinese culture traditionally appreciated the significance of its environment, and that China is socialist, Pan Yue argued that China is in a position to lead the world in addressing ecological problems (Pan 2007).

It appears that Pan Yue was strongly supported by Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and to a lesser extent by President Hu Jintao, and as a consequence had a huge influence on the government. Wen and Hu’s rise to power in 2002 was a triumph for the populist wing of the Communist Party who were reacting against the growing disparities of income, corruption and environmental destruction that resulted from Deng Xiaoping’s and Jiang Zemin’s neoliberal policies. With these policies, workers and peasant organizations were outlawed, businessmen were allowed to join and influence the Communist Party. The result, according to its opponents, was prosperity for everyone, except peasants, workers and women. In 2006 (according to one estimate), China’s Gini coefficient reached 49.6, approaching the inequality of South American countries (Huang 2008). Confronting these problems, Hu and Wen promoted local democracy, tried to provide more services to the peasantry, and tried to deal with environmental problems, reforesting land and embracing the notion of ecological civilization. As Wen’s influence waned, Pan Yue appears to have been sidelined (Watts, 2009), although he has permanently influenced China’s economic policies, and officially, China is still committed to ecological civilization. These changes in direction and what they signify have highlighted the difficulty in understanding China and where it, and its environmentalists, are heading.

This difficulty is not simply a matter of understanding a change in power balance, as though these changes were equivalent to understanding a change in leadership after elections in USA, Britain or similar Western countries. It highlights the fundamentally different situation and culture of China to these Western nations. This difference also affects the effort to understand this difference, because to those involved in this endeavor it soon becomes evident how difficult it is to assess the different perspectives on these differences. As Daniel A. Bell, a Canadian holding a professorship in political

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3 On the effects of the elimination of public services in China, see Pei 2006, ch.5.
theory at Tsinghua University, one of China’s leading universities in Beijing, began his introduction to a
recent book on China:

What’s the big story about the rise of modern China? Is it the continuing human rights abuses? The
expansion of personal freedoms? The development of local democracy? The resilience of the
authoritarian state? Or perhaps the economic miracle, with hundreds of millions lifted out of poverty? Or
the hundreds of millions still living in poverty? The answer of course, is all of the above. A joke about
China is that one can say anything about it without getting it right. Another joke is that one can say
anything about it without getting it wrong. Yet another joke is that the longer one stays in the country,
the more intimate the grasp of the language, culture, and history, the less confident one feels about
judgments and predictions (Bell 2010, xxvii).

This book was first published in 2008 when China was much easier to understand than it is now.

Since then the Charter 08 movement made its move, claiming that the victory of communism in
China “thrust the nation into the abyss of totalitarianism”, denying that the regime of Mao Zedong
achieved anything for the people, and calling for the elimination of one-party rule (effectively, the
overthrow of the Communist government), with its leader, Liu Xiaobo, being awarded the Nobel Prize
for Peace and being jailed in China. China has had to deal with the global financial crisis, and the US
government under Obama has attempted to combat the success of the “Beijing Consensus”, a policy
upholding the principles of the United Nations in opposition to the “Washington Consensus”, by forging
an alliance against China between countries encircling it. It has become evident that many of the policies
pushed by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to overcome inequalities, failed. For instance, delivering health
care to the peasantry failed because after the privatization of rural health clinics and facilities there was
no way to deliver the allocated money, and there has been a bias in the press against such “radical”
policies (Gao, 2008, 198). While environmental policies have been in place, the environmental situation
of China has worsened. One of the worst problems is water shortage due to excess exploitation of
ground water in the north and northwest which has steadily lowered water tables, exacerbated by a
prolonged drought, probably the effect of global climate destabilization. This threatens the capacity of
China to secure its food supply. It was in the north that, through irrigation, the Communist government
was able to dramatically increase agricultural output after the revolution. To deal with this looming crisis
the Chinese government is planning major engineering projects to move water from the south to the
north, the most ambitious of which will involve diverting the flow of rivers from the Tibetan plateau,
some of which are at present flowing towards India, Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam (Pomeranz, 2009). In
the meantime, the elitists in the Communist Party have increased their power, securing the succession
of Xi Jinping to the position of president after Hu Jintao’s retirement as President in 2013 (over-riding
Hu’s chosen successor). This is revealing. Although Xi Jinping himself has not used his position to
accumulate wealth and is critical of those who do, his extended family have accumulated assets worth
$US100s of millions. His niece owns $US50 million worth of Hong Kong real estate, including a $US31.5
million waterside home that remains empty (Bennett and Hirschberg 2012).

China is best understood as a capitalist economy going through the stage of primitive accumulation
with the state serving the interests of the bourgeoisie, with its pre-eminent concern to assure high
profitability of business enterprises by dispossessioning the peasantry of means of production to create a
pliable proletariat in the cities. It is more complicated than this, however. Transnational corporations have been the greatest beneficiaries of the cheap labor and lax environmental regulation. The local bourgeoisie use everything at their disposal to increase their share of profits, but often work on very low margins and are very susceptible to changes in the global economy. The central government also makes some effort to ameliorate the conditions of employees, but decentralization of government with local government performance defined mainly in terms of growth of GDP and therefore primarily oriented to attracting and maintaining foreign investment, along with a corrupt and ineffective legal system, means that the government effectively sides with capitalists against employees and local populations. And it is becoming evident that many officials and Communist Party members are leading capitalists, and are aligned with international capital rather than local capital. The outcome has been described by Mobo Gao:

> China is just a sweatshop that produces cheap goods for other countries ... [L]ow-cost Chinese imports [to USA] have saved US consumers about $100 billion dollars since China’s reforms began in 1978. ... China does not really own this factory either. Most enterprises and manufacturing facilities are owned by foreign firms, companies or multinationals who take the lion’s share of the profit (Gao 2008, 176).

In 2005 foreign invested companies accounted for 58% of total exports, and 88% of exports in high-tech categories. The Chinese business class is left picking up the crumbs. State Owned Enterprises provide some counter to this tendency, but many have been partially or fully privatized, with shares often going to foreign investors (Andreas, 2011). It is some indication of the attitudes of the more successful of Chinese business people that they are buying real estate in affluent countries, apparently ready to escape if social order disintegrates, thereby supporting William Robinson’s characterization of the new world order as a transnational economy controlled by global ruling class, the global corporatocracy (Anderlini 2011; Robinson 2004; Korten 2001; Perkins 2006). Between the mid-1990s and 2008, some $US125 billion was illegally moved out of the China for such purposes, according to China’s central bank (Branigan, 2012). The notion of ecological civilization is directed against the system that is proving so oppressive of and threatening to the Chinese.

**From the New Enlightenment to the New Left**

With the triumph of Deng Xiaoping, branding the failures of the past on “ultra-leftism”, intellectuals regained some of the status they lost during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike the peasantry and workers, the conditions of intellectuals, along with officials, improved dramatically in subsequent years. Consequently, the changes brought about by Deng’s policies tended to be looked upon favorably by intellectuals who promoted the era he inaugurated as the “New Enlightenment”, and it is clear that Deng fostered their support for his economic reforms, although he was contemptuous of their quest for greater freedom. So, while in the first decade after the triumph of the new order there was an alliance between intellectuals and government, in the latter part of the 1980s growing inequality and increasing corruption without any signs of moving towards a Western form of democracy led to disaffection. This led many to the protests of the late 1980s which culminated in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations

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4 On this, from the perspective of an agent of transnational corporations, see Midler 2011.
and massacre of 1989.\(^5\) Despite this, the material conditions for intellectuals, along with officials, have continued to improve up to the present, and at least in the big cities they now have privileges and lifestyles similar to those in comparable occupations in advanced Western nations. But their influence on society has been greatly reduced. Most intellectuals have either accepted this situation and accepted their division into experts, scholars, managers and technocrats serving the government (Wang 2006, 168), have hoped for the collapse and replacement of the government, as with the Charter 08 movement, called for a modified form of democracy within a one party state, as with Zhang Musheng, or have called for a return to true socialism betrayed by Deng Xiaoping, as with Maoists such as Minqi Li (Li 2008).

The best way to understand Chinese intellectuals is, using Pierre Bourdieu’s categories, as the subordinate fraction of the ruling class that, like many other intellectuals around the world, has misunderstood its own position and the social order of which it is part (Bourdieu, 1993, 281n.11). Because of their history, this misunderstanding by Chinese intellectuals has been greater and therefore easier to diagnose. Unraveling and revealing their true situation and its relation to the dynamics of the global system of capitalism not only facilitates an understanding of China, but an understanding of the entire world system, and thereby the possibilities for overcoming oppression globally. This task has been undertaken with great perspicuity by Wang Hui (for which he was branded a “New Leftist”, a term of abuse, by his opponents) (Wang 2006a; 2011a; Wang, 2011b).

Wang’s main target has been the supposed “New Enlightenment” and the intellectuals supporting it, the intellectuals who embraced the post-Maoist transformation of the economy, although in attacking these Wang has criticized other intellectuals and also, government officials. The focus of his critique is the assumption, almost incredible for people who were supposed to have studied Marx, that free markets lead to freedom, democracy and social justice, and that by implementing neoliberal policies, China will advance inexorably towards the forms of freedom and democracy of the advanced capitalist countries. But as Wang pointed out, neoliberalism does not recognize the division between politics and economics characteristic of the nineteenth century, replacing the political and social spheres with pure economics which has become the antithesis of political and social freedom. Wang charged Chinese (deconstructive) postmodernists with being extreme in this regard, rather than being the critics of the New Enlightenment they claimed to be. In the guise of defending popular culture against intellectual elitism, they ignored the formative role of capitalist activity in everyday life, accepting the marketization of culture and thereby undermining any possibility of criticizing the oppression generated by the market. Neoliberalism and the imposition of markets in China, facilitated by the repudiation of the moral condemnation of the market by socialists, is inseparable from authoritarianism and violence, Wang argued.

Along with this mistaken assumption about markets has been the failure to understand the nature of Chinese society before the rise of Deng Xiaoping, and subsequently, the failure to understand the nature of the Chinese government and its officials. For instance, attacking egalitarianism because of its association with the ultra-leftism of Maoism fails to acknowledge the immense divisions in society in the

\(^5\) The background to all this, revealing Deng Xioping’s hostility to ‘bourgeois liberalization’, see Zhao 2009.
Maoist era – between urban and rural China, the Party leadership and the rest of the population (with children of Party members going to special elite schools) and the emphasis placed on family origins. To understand how this was possible it is necessary to appreciate that for the Communist Party, including Mao Zedong, Marxism was seen primarily as an orientation for developing the forces of production as rapidly as possible. It was, to use the terminology of Aleksandr Bogdanov, a form of “war communism” (Gare 1994), less brutal than Stalinism because of the relatively benign influence of Mao Zedong who appears to have respected the peasants and had a genuine commitment to communism in the long run (Mao 2007, 117f.), in a society that did not yet have the conditions for achieving it. This misunderstanding of the past in turn has been associated with a failure to appreciate the relationship between government officials and the market economy, and the relationship between Maoist China and its subsequent developments. Wang pointed out that in China, economic and political power became indistinguishable. Party leaders became the new capitalists, directly participating in both domestic and international economic activity and becoming agents for large corporations and industries. It is estimated that more than 90% of the richest 20,000 people in China are related to senior government or Communist Party officials (Kwong 2006). Wang charged that the Party had “clownishly” buried “all the reasonable aspects of the revolution and socialism” while employing “state violence and monopolization to guarantee the smooth transition” to an economy “based on market mechanisms, in the process wrecking all of the equitable features of the social guarantees contained with the old system” (Wang 2006a, 117). Jiang Zemin’s decision to allow capitalists into the Communist Party was thus merely legitimating Party members who had enriched themselves. By working with the government to impose markets, Wang argued, the New Enlightenment intellectuals were complicit in destroying the freedom, democracy and social justice that they purported to stand for. They were complicit in transforming China “from a headquarters of world revolution to a thriving centre of capitalist activity, from a Third World anti-imperialist nation to one of imperialism’s ‘strategic partners’” (Wang 2006a, 5).

The work of Wang Hui signified a new direction for Chinese intellectuals, leading to efforts to revive a critical, moral discourse which had previously been silenced with the question: “So, do you want to return to the days of the Cultural Revolution?” (Wang, 2006a, 5). This has been associated with a return to Chinese traditions of thought and the emergence of left Confucianism and an interest in European rather than American ideas, all of which helped pave the way for the promotion of “ecological civilization”. Attacking the neoliberal and postmodernist dismissal of state power and the nation-state, Wang argued that all critical social movements since the nineteenth century have taken the nation-state as the only effective arena of political struggle, even as they have linked this struggle to their inclinations towards internationalism (Wang 2006a, 126). “[T]he state must take on the serious responsibility of ensuring social justice, coordinating the market system, and setting up a fair and democratic world order” he wrote (Wang 2006a, 130). He pointed out that “The growth of the gap between city and country, the substantial expansion the number of the poor and of the floating population, and the

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6 As Mao put it at the time, ‘The aim of the socialist revolution is to liberate the productive forces.’ Wang 2006a, 14).
7 As in the Soviet Union, China had to mobilize its whole society to industrialize rapidly in order to avoid subjugation. Mobo Gao, (1999, ch.s 5 & 6) has provided evidence that Mao was a benign influence on other leaders of the revolution, constraining the more reckless tendencies of Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping.
destruction of land, water, forest, and other natural resources are all directly related to the withdrawal of the state’s role from rural areas” (Wang 2006a, 128). Since there is no united world government to deal with global issues such as preserving the global environment, it is the responsibility of every national government to create the social and economic order that would supersede the scope of individual nation-states. The nation state will be central to addressing and dealing with global problems, such as the global ecological crisis.

This requires a much more active role for intellectuals. Wang criticized neo-Marxists for focusing almost exclusively on economic democracy and ignoring cultural democracy. As he pointed out:

In the present context, the complex interpenetration of the state machinery and the capitalist market means on the one hand that the state is completely involved in cultural production, and on the other hand, that cultural production is limited by both capital and the market. Clearly, in the present circumstances, cultural production is part of social reproduction. Therefore ... cultural criticism must be thoroughly integrated with political and economic analysis. ... [T]he struggles for economic, political, and cultural democracy are all essentially the same fight (Wang 2006a, 174).

Examining new theories of modernization that transcended New Enlightenment and Western perspectives by focusing on rural and township developments, Wang praised them for reviving concepts such as “collective”, “cooperation”, “local feeling”, “fairness” and “equality”, but criticized them for falling back on the yardstick of efficiency. As he argued, they need to address such questions as:

whether the system of production and distribution in the rural enterprises promotes the expansion of economic democracy, whether their culture is conducive to a political democratization that will guarantee economic democracy, whether their mode of production can protect the environment, whether their organizational methods are conducive to political participation, and whether, in the context of global capitalism, they are capable of setting the systemic and ethical foundations of economic equality, both domestic and international (Wang 2006a, 166).

It is such approaches that Wang promoted in his influential magazine *Dushu* (Reading) from 1996 until 2007, when he was dismissed as editor.

**From Neoliberalism to Ecological Civilization**

The promotion of “ecological civilization” by officials such as Pan Yue and intellectuals such as Wang Zhihe exemplifies the new orientation called for by Wang Hui. It requires a struggle for cultural, political and economic democracy simultaneously, locally and internationally. It requires the government to control the economy, and the people to control the government, ultimately, to govern themselves through the institutions of the state. As Pan Yue wrote, “China’s people have the biggest stake in environmental protection, and so must become the driving force” (Pan 2006b). The drive for ecological civilization is a reaction to neoliberalism, particularly in the extreme form that has come to dominate Chinese society, and the form of Marxism that reduced culture and politics to instruments for the development of the forces of production, which thereby engendered neoliberalism. As Pan Yue put it:

China’s environmental problems, complex as the causes may be, can ultimately be attributed to our understanding of Marxism. For most of our recent history, we saw in Marxism only a philosophy of class
struggle. We believed that economic development would solve all our problems. In the reform period, this misreading of Marx morphed into an unrestrained pursuit of material gain devoid of morality. Traditional Chinese culture, with its emphasis on harmony between human beings and nature, was thrown aside (Pan 2006b).

Overcoming this form of Marxism, reading Marx properly to recover his critique of political economy, commodity fetishism and the illusions of progress which in fact enslave people, also requires a revival of those aspects of Chinese civilization that promoted such harmony and which upheld values beyond ever increasing levels of consumption.

In opposition to the dissolution of politics into the economy and the massive concentration of power associated with this, we can see that the opening up of a new direction by Wang Hui and allied intellectuals, leading to the idea of creating an ecological civilization, was an incredible achievement. It was an achievement that had become necessary (although not inevitable) because of the situation of China. Far from lagging behind the West, China was the realization of the ideal and tendencies everywhere of neoliberalism, particularly in its neoconservative form, to dissolve every facet of life into the market and to subordinate every facet of life to the accumulation of capital, and the consequences were more clearly visible for this reason. China was facing, and still faces, economic, political, social and environmental collapse, and this inspired the very deep thinking which culminated in the notion of ecological civilization (Foster 2012). To some extent, the rise of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao’s socio-economic vision of “harmonious society”, reviving Confucian ideals which provided the propitious environment within which the notion of ecological civilization could be promoted and finally accepted by the government, could itself be seen as expression of this new direction.

Even in face of this crisis, the alignments of immense concentrations of power associated with neoliberalism that had driven China towards ecological destruction in the first place guaranteed that there would be a reaction against these developments. Instead of providing an impetus to overcome injustices and inequities, “harmonious society” became in the eyes of many a euphemism for suppression of dissent and control on information. Still, this has not led to a repudiation of the notion of ecological civilization. Rather, it has been associated with a tendency to water down the radicalism of the idea. To begin with, this was inevitable once “ecological civilization” had been embraced as government policy. Established intellectuals, intellectuals who accepted the division between experts, scholars, managers and technocrats, would take up this idea, redefine “ecological civilization” as a purely technical problem, and would marginalize intellectuals with a broader vision who recognized its political and cultural dimensions. People in positions of power, threatened by the notion of ecological civilization, would almost inevitably support such intellectuals to neutralize the critique and symbolic power of the original proponents of the idea. They would then attempt to change the meaning of “ecological civilization” and use it to their own advantage, just as in the West the notion of “sustainable

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8 The agenda and *modus operandi* of the neoliberals has been exposed by recent research (Mirowski and Plehwe). This logic of neoliberalism has been explicated by S.M. Amadae (Amadae, 2003). Of course, neoliberals are the exact opposite of liberals, the neoconservatives the exact opposite of conservatives, just as most members of the Chinese Communist Party are the exact opposite of communists. The inversion of the meanings of words was well portrayed by George Orwell in *1984*. 
“development” was in 1972 appropriated and transformed by the global corporatocracy (Sklair 2001, ch.7). This, essentially, has happened to some extent. However, such ideological moves cannot detract from the very radical potential of this vision, any more than the utilization of bowdlerized versions of Marxism by corrupt governments to legitimate their rule can detract from the critical potential of Marx’s work. This is evident in the counter tendency to advance the notion of ecological civilization as a development of “ecological Marxism” (Wang 2012).

Conclusion: The Future of Ecological Civilization

“Ecological civilization” is a much more difficult vision to swallow and neutralize than “sustainable development”. It now has a life of its own. Pan Yue and intellectuals aligned with him are international figures with an influence far beyond China. Their analyses of China and the world system and their vision of the future have revealed the monstrous logic behind neoliberalism, where it leads, the oppression and violence it generates, and concomitantly, what is required to overcome this logic.

The career of the notion of “ecological civilization” in China manifests the tendencies to domesticate it. As mainstream intellectuals and officials in China have taken up the idea of ecological civilization they have redefined it in accordance with their political programs and specialized discourses. For the most part, they have defined ecological civilization as a set of solutions to technical problems that China has to deal with in providing water, food, housing and power to its people and dealing with the environmental damage caused by these efforts. The notion of “civilization” is subordinated to questions of how to secure food supply, generate power more efficiently, utilize information technology, reduce pollution, and so on. What they are most interested in from Westerners is ideas on technology and the possibilities of technology transfers. These are not insignificant concerns. Under the banner of ecological civilization the Chinese have also shown themselves willing to take up and develop less environmentally destructive forms of technology and alternative forms of energy that have been developed but not been embraced in the West because they have challenge established economic interests. This includes a massive reforestation program and the urban designs of William McDonough and Michael Braungart (authors of From Cradle to Cradle) that recycle everything that is produced. In 2011 China invested $US47.4 billion developing clean energy. However, such measures are not enough and China still gets 80% of its power from coal. Few proponents of ecological civilization show much interest in the political and cultural dimensions of ecological civilization and their blinkered vision is revealed in their lack of interest in forms of technology that involve accepting slower and more labor intensive technologies based on ecological principles. It is also evident in their failure to see that many technological transfers will not be forthcoming because technological innovations in advanced Western countries are the only protection Western workers in manufacturing have against competition from an over-exploited and underpaid Chinese workforce. That is, they are unable to see that there is a global system in place that China is presently part of and supporting that has to be displaced if China is to overcome the ecological threats facing it.

Pan Yue is right about the broader situation of China, however. China’s environment is being wrecked to produce consumer goods for the rich, the vast majority of whom are not Chinese and are living in other countries. China is a country from which only a miniscule minority could escape the
consequences of local and global ecological collapse. The logic driving this destruction has now been revealed. While elements in the present Chinese government might cynically seek to promote the idea of ecological civilization to Westerners to disguise the policies they are actually pursuing and to serve their particular interests, China and the Chinese, with the assistance of its wealthy elites who now control much of the Communist Party, are being massively exploited by Westerners who are benefitting from China’s cheap labor and lax environmental policies. They are allowing their Chinese compatriots to do the hard work of manufacturing for a pittance while accepting its polluting and ecologically destructive industries. While some Chinese have joined the global corporatocracy, in future Chinese will find joining this class more restricted. It is one thing for Chinese to undermine the working class in advanced Western nations by supplying cheap labor to transnational corporations; it is another to enter into competition with their ruling elites. The growing hostility to China is evident in US strategic actions. In response to this, the Chinese might embrace militarism and enter into an arms race with the US, but with present weapon systems this is to court disaster for the Chinese and for the world. The only viable path the Chinese have is to promote a more robust notion of ecological civilization globally, however weak this path might seem at present. And this will require them to confront their own collusion in maintaining the present global system, and the relationship between this and the malignant form of capitalism which is now operating in China.

The Chinese will have to liberate themselves from their oppression, and they are so entangled with the global system that they can only liberate themselves by working for the liberation of the whole of humanity. In doing so, they must also liberate themselves from Chinese capitalists parading as Communists. There is evidence that many Chinese environmentalists are embracing the more radical implications of the notion of ecological civilization and are relating the technical issues to the social, political and cultural dimensions of this, appreciating the destructive imperatives of markets and the need for different ways to define reality, evaluate situations and choose goals independently of the market, and seeking to develop institutions which empower people to influence the state and to govern themselves. This is associated with the creative synthesis of ecological Marxism with revived ethical and political ideas associated with Chinese traditions of thought. Eco-socialists are aligning themselves with and drawing on the ideas of the left Confucians (Bell, 2010). Young people in particular appear to be attracted to this synthesis and appear to be prepared to do the hard work of applying such ideas to concrete problems and to thinking through the implications of their work.

Westerners who take up the notion of ecological civilization are highlighting the barbarity and decadence of those supporting the current world-system and how the exploitation of peripheral and developing countries is integral to the ecologically destructive tendencies of capitalism. They can and do support Chinese environmentalists who have pointed out that it is the affluent West that has been and continues to be responsible for most of the ecological destruction in the world, and who are in a position to and should be taking the drastic measures required to curb their destructiveness. Still, there are still tensions between Western and Chinese environmentalists. Western eco-socialists sympathetic to the notion of ecological civilization have been justifiably criticized by Pan Yue for failing to appreciate the massive problems in securing the basic necessities of life still faced by people in developing countries, including China. Also, in dealing with Chinese environmentalists who are actually influencing
government policies, Western eco-socialists, who often have been marginalized from the decision-making processes in their own countries, are prone to ignore the constraints on their Chinese counterparts if they are to maintain their positions of influence on government. However, Western eco-socialists can see more clearly than Chinese environmentalists that it is also necessary to recognize not only the complicity of power elites in China with global capitalism, but their importance to upholding this system and its destructive logic. Not all Chinese who speak for ecological civilization are sincerely committed to all its implications, and it is inevitable that Western eco-socialists will have difficulty distinguishing between those intellectuals and officials who have a deep commitment to it and those who embrace the idea primarily to further their careers as scientific experts, technicians or as servants of China’s public relations industry. This should not deter the formation of alliances between Western and Chinese eco-socialists, however. By clarifying the meaning of “ecological civilization”, Western eco-socialists will strengthen the position of Chinese eco-socialists. The more the idea of ecological civilization is embraced globally, the more power these radical Chinese environmentalists will have to influence their government to live up to the ideal they have spawned.

As with every great idea, “ecological civilization” will be prone to corruption. Primarily, this will come from those with political power manipulating language to their own advantage, and there are always intellectuals willing to prostitute themselves to serve such people. However, more subtle and more pernicious forms of corruption, more damaging because its perpetrators are more prone to deceiving themselves, come from intellectuals posturing as radicals without being genuinely committed to changing society. In such cases there is an abrogation of responsibility to do the hard work of providing people with the means to orient themselves to live, the means to understand their own and others’ predicaments, and the means to appreciate what goals are worth striving for. There is a failure to reveal to people how they can act effectively to achieve these goals, and above all, to inspire them to act. To avoid such intellectual corruption it is necessary for radical intellectuals to pay particular attention to those struggling in locations where the problems, contradictions, tensions, confusions, mystifications and possibilities are greatest. With China’s history of struggle against European and Japanese imperialism, the devastating impact of modernism on its traditional culture, a bloody civil war, the achievements and failures of Maoism, the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and then the corruption of the Communist Party with its synthesis of authoritarianism and free markets, taking neoliberalism to its logical conclusion, there is no other place where these problems and contradictions are greater. It is necessary for all eco-socialist intellectuals, and Western intellectuals in particular, to learn from the struggles of the eco-socialists and their allies in China.

The first thing to learn from Chinese intellectuals such as Wang Hui is the importance of intellectual work, and the importance of fighting for the conditions for undertaking it. And intellectual work should be above all directed towards empowering people. Then it is necessary to recognize the central role of the state as the site of political struggles. It is through the institutions of the state that the economy will have to be controlled and transformed to serve the people and local and international ecological problems addressed. The state is also required to provide the conditions for people to develop their culture so that they can comprehend the institutions of the state and govern themselves. As Wang Hui argued, economic, political and cultural democracy are inseparable, and it is necessary to fight for all
three at once. This will involve developing the forms of thinking and institutions necessary for people to participate in decision-making. Consequently, intellectuals need to resolutely oppose the fragmentation of intellectual life between experts, scholars, managers and technocrats, and oppose the fragmentation of knowledge into knowledge of economics, politics and culture, or aspects of each of these. As Wang has shown, it is this fragmentation and separation associated with the triumph of supposed “expert knowledge” in economics, government and culture that has produced a depoliticized politics, not only in China, but throughout the world (Wang 2006b; Wang 2011, ch.1.). In a world in which people’s minds have been colonized so effectively by the forms of thinking and illusions of capitalism, including illusions about what constitutes a good life, it is also necessary to recover the cultural achievements of pre-capitalist civilizations. Chinese proponents of ecological civilization are justified in their claims that Chinese traditions of thought focused on finding “Dao” (“path” or “way” – the Chinese do not use definite or indefinite articles) have much to contribute to working out how to live in the present and how to create a post-capitalist society. Ecological civilization will require not only support from the Chinese, but the inspiration of Chinese civilization. They have shown the necessity of putting forward a vision of the future that will inspire people to strive for it, and they have named it – “ecological civilization”.

References


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