

Against and For China’s Ecological Civilisation: Economising the *Bios* or “Life-ising” Transition?

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Abstract

As the climate crisis intensifies, overlapping with the emergence of a lethal virus, and a planet poisoning economy, questions regarding thinking-and-doing transition become increasingly urgent. In this article, we explore the concept of “ecological civilisation” (EcoCiv) as a productive conjunction of Chinese concepts and ways of thinking that precede China’s encounter with Western modernity, and their re-reading and revision from a post-Western modernity lens. China’s role in any possible global transition to sustainability is unquestionably central – yet curiously neglected in transition studies. At the same time the official project of EcoCiv is in fact emerging as the very opposite of its proclaimed spirit. The article offers a reconceptualisation of *shengtai wenming* (ecological civilisation) as a paradigm shift to life-ising the economy (and society) instead of economising life. From this altered perspective, the article presents and discusses preliminary evidence of a largely neglected, but potentially significant, bottom-up, extra-state dynamism in contemporary China that entails both elements and principles for a genuinely ecological, trans-modern civilisation. It concludes with reflections on the resulting change in agenda, not least for transition studies, outlining a set of four principles of doing *shengtai wenming* – i.e. of life-ising transition.

Keywords: China, *shengtai wenming*, ecological civilisation, trans-modernity, transition, life-ising, sustainability

Of life and death

2020 opened up a new period of death: of millions of people, but also of social life and the public sphere, of cities and rural livelihoods, of individualist political liberty (and naivety thereon) and of globalisation as a project of seamless human interaction (for those able to participate in it). Worse still, the death of the planet, or at least human “civilisation”, has loomed ever larger and darker. This in turn has confronted the world with a newfound urgency – of life, for what is more urgent than that?

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These overlapping crises expose as undeniable the process over the past decades and centuries of a particular, dominant form of techno-economic progress that has been economising (or exploiting and killing) life and building on death since its very colonial origins. Now the imperative is clear: to proceed in the other direction and “life-ise” the economy instead. Where, then, is new life to be found? Or, rather, where is life newly to be found, protected, supported and rebuilt?

An emerging orthodoxy in answer to these questions concerns “transition”, and even “global just transition” (Heffron / McCauley 2018). Such transition studies aim to rework and/or to keep in place (what is variously valued in) social structures with a view to guiding and reinforcing informed, rational ways forward. Symptomatically, however, the transition literature focuses overwhelmingly on examples from, and policy guidance for, the liberal democratic and wealthy market economies of the Global North (Smith et al. 2010).

Along these lines of thought, China’s role in any possible global transition to sustainability is unquestionably central – yet curiously neglected in transition studies. If anything, China’s environmental efforts and credentials are increasingly subject to legitimate, but partial, criticism in an increasingly politicised context, making analysis of and learning from any positive contribution increasingly elusive. In this paper, we address this problem by exploring an unquestionably problematic, but also singularly relevant, concept in confronting the current situation of ecological breakdown and planetary crisis, also referred to as the Anthropocene (aka “Capitalocene”; Moore 2017): China’s “Ecological Civilisation” (EcoCiv). Specifically, we explore its contradictory uses and manifestations that emerge from deep tensions between the party-state, on the one hand, and the much broader, complex and dynamic layers of bottom-up innovation within China, on the other.

Regarding the question of *global* transition, the global roll-out of the Ecological Civilisation policy is, in fact, embryonic. Yet there has been a rush of legislation and regulation under this banner with a focus on demarcating ecological zones and other regulatory “red lines” within China’s domestic borders. The key question of the extent to which China will inspire, support or even lead sustainable transition on a global scale, however, is effectively that of the potential contribution of EcoCiv to this urgent global challenge.

Transition studies, and the broader, longstanding paradigm of social scientific thought in which it is situated, is ill-suited to engage productively with EcoCiv. For China’s EcoCiv is a rapidly moving, multi-layered and contradictory phenomenon. It cannot, therefore, be assessed by comparison against pre-set benchmarks formulated to measure the greening of constitutively different, well-established polities in Western societies. Rather, it must be addressed on its own terms and vis-à-vis its surging and turbulent, not linear and rational, dynamics (Tyfield 2018).

To open up the analytical field of debate for this article, EcoCiv can be defined in two contrasting but interrelated ways along both socio-political and conceptual tensions. First, there is Ecological Civilisation as an official narrative and policy discourse – indeed, written into the PRC's constitution – as opposed to ecological civilisation (here in lower case) as a broader philosophical and socio-political vision and project. Secondly, and lining up roughly alongside the first distinction, is the contrast between, respectively, EcoCiv as a programme of perfecting and rectifying modernity, largely with techno-economic and/or state-governmental interventions, and as the movement altogether *beyond* modernity (hence trans-modern) towards a new (and hence also likely post-capitalist) phase of civilisation per se (Huang et al. 2022).

Trans-modernity refers to the cultural and socio-technical aspects that linger beyond (but are also prior and/or external to) European and North American conventions of what counts as “modern” (Dussel 2012). Engaging with trans-modernity also implies questions of method and positionality. We engage with diverse and contradictory notions of EcoCiv as a conceptual field for the study of how Chinese ideas, policies and practices may affect notions and expressions of conflicting as well as overlapping modernities in the age of ecological emergency and the need for effective transition(s). Thus, we study EcoCiv through an interpretive dialogue that is in itself trans-cultural, as it moves (us) into and across the different cultures that inform the concept as well as our own critical understandings and interpretations of it.

In the process, we do not endorse a particular notion of EcoCiv over another but highlight some of the main tensions at work in the multiple interpretations and political uses of the concept. Our interpretive relationship with trans-modernity operates through the hermeneutical possibilities of Chinese and English readings of *shengtai wenming* and ecological civilisation respectively. The result is not simply a better understanding of Chinese trans-modernity and its techno-cultural projections onto the world. Nor is this endeavour intended to provide a sharper differentiation between Chinese and Western paradigms for transition, as we engage primarily with different understandings of EcoCiv within Chinese thought and policy. The result may simply point towards an alternative way of thinking-and-doing transitions altogether and call for further substantiation of the matter.

Accordingly, we here contrast the emerging official actuality of EcoCiv, as an elitist political project of eco-authoritarianism in China, to the largely occluded potential for “transitioning” entailed in broader, non-official, indeed extra-state, manifestations and conceptualisations thereof. Our priority is firmly on the latter, but conscious of the increasingly influential reach of the former.

We argue that ecological civilisation responds to an emerging and unprecedented phenomenon of Sino-global transformation, which means that EcoCiv is not just a new label for sustainable development nor a neat environmental or socio-technical policy. It is instead precisely a grand-scale societal project

(as in the latter, broader conception above) that holds the potential to shape and alter global understandings and practices of sustainability transition far beyond the influence of actual, individual policy initiatives that unfold under its formal banner. This is where the specifically *civilisational* scale and aspect of EcoCiv arises and is called to our attention. However, complicating matters further while also opening new and promising avenues for enquiry, Chinese (evolving) conceptualisations of “civilisation” are certainly different from Western notions thereof. Hence they call forth yet more conceptual exploration and collective learning – a process that is, of course, cut short and distorted where the term is loaded solely and prematurely with the heavy-lifting of official governmental and political work.

We seek to work with Chinese ideas and examples to (re-)open the concept of “civilisation” beyond the tarnished, self-congratulatory high-modern Western idea of being the (realised) summit of cultural, political and technological sophistication in mastery of the external world, human and “natural”. Specifically, we explore an emerging conceptual constellation that reconnects and reintegrates ideas of civilisation with life, as both unending messy process and socio-technical creativity. Thereby, we seek to open ways to enliven or vitalise transition thinking-and-doing through the thought-provoking prisms of ecological civilisation as a productive conjunction of non-official Chinese concepts and ways of thinking, and their discussion from a post-Western-Modernity (or trans-modern) lens.

The article proceeds as follows. In section 2, we introduce the actuality of China’s official EcoCiv project by relating it to the Western orthodoxy of ecological modernisation in whose shadow and on whose foundation it has emerged, albeit as a radicalised mutation thereof. In section 3, we explore what are emerging as the even more destructive consequences of this radical mutation of modern Western thought. Sections 2 and 3 together thus argue that the official project of EcoCiv is in fact unfolding as the very opposite of its proclaimed spirit. In section 4, we change tack, exploring the immanent potential of the Chinese conceptual conjunction of *shengtai wenming* as opposed to “ecological civilisation”. Thereafter, in section 5, we present *prima facie* evidence, from this altered perspective, of a largely neglected, bottom-up – and internal – dynamism in contemporary China that provides us with novel elements to think more productively about a genuinely ecological, trans-modern, civilisational scheme through a non-Eurocentric teleonomy. Finally, in section 6, we conclude with reflections on the change in agenda, not least for transition studies, to which the synthesis of the foregoing arguments leads, outlining a set of four principles of doing *shengtai wenming* – i.e. of “life-ising” transition.

Ecological Civilisation: A simple rescaling of eco-modernisation?

We start our analysis by acknowledging the profoundly dysfunctional institutional forms, or building blocks, of the contemporary world, vis-à-vis both efforts to tackle (or even admit) climate emergency and its worsening production in the first place.¹ This concerns:

- 1) Capitalism, from its colonial origins (Quijano / Wallerstein 1992) to its late, zombie neoliberal or “Googliberal” (Tyfield 2018) form;
- 2) The nation-state as the pre-eminent form and scale of political organisation and power, and its need to reproduce economic growth and to appropriate nature in order to secure its own conditions of existence (Moore 2014); and
- 3) A dominant governmental discourse of technological rationalism, including the increasing political centrality of techno-scientific systems and imaginaries of eco-modernisation and techno-fetishism that cut across all social challenges, including climate change and transition, as “problems” awaiting appropriate techno-economic “solutions”.

These three dominant institutional modes are not only major hurdles to meaningful climate action or transition towards sustainable practices. Instead of serving enabling functions towards that end, they are also arrangements that tend to develop, and have in fact at present developed, into specific forms that are intrinsically incompatible with such action, rendering them instead key drivers of crisis exacerbation. These are the socio-political structures that are currently driving the relentless economisation of life, i.e. planetary death. The potential contribution of EcoCiv (and hence China) to global transition hinges precisely on its capacity to catalyse the intensification of transformative social forces to drive the emergence of a coherent and systemic alternative to each of these three, combined and separately.

The official Chinese project of EcoCiv, however, does not counter these prevailing institutional forms but rather advances them to unprecedented heights.² Indeed, one of the challenges in understanding ecological civilisation and the place this concept occupies in China's complex pathways regarding any potential just, low-carbon transition is this paradigm's relationship with its (apparent) equivalent in Western thought, namely “ecological modernisation”. Certainly, in the actual party-state-led project of China's EcoCiv, the “civilisation” thereby envisioned is primarily a project of modernisation, hence “technologisation” and “economisation” (Huang et al. 2022); and, indeed, a specifically powerful form thereof.

1 See, e.g., Lent 2021, Rowson 2020, Tyfield 2018 for the case regarding this system “meta-crisis” and, relatedly, “meta-modernism” as one emerging school of thought on trans-modernism.

2 Hence demonstrating clearly the ageless truth that bears regular reminding, that an alternative to a current but bad status quo – and even one hostile to or critical of what prevails – is not itself, thereby, necessarily good or preferable.

First coined around 1992, and referred to as a social theory of environmental change, ecological modernisation is grounded on the assumption that capitalist relations are not the cause of, but actually the promising solution to, current ecological crises (Fisher / Freudenburg 2001). The basic idea is that capitalism can solve its own problems, if the necessary socio-technological improvements and improvers are properly identified, technologically reengineered and socially reorganised.

Such a modernising process entails also a practical commitment to the logics and workings of the market and its relationship with environmental problems, both of which are assumed to be mediated, facilitated and ultimately invigorated by “the right type” of technological innovation. Reflecting the triumphalism of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, the political powers of the state (i.e. the compound of financial stimuli, regulations and possibilities of social ordering, and even public contestations thereof) are here seen as subordinate to the powers of the “free” market. For the operating mechanisms of the market are believed to deliver the socially feasible fixes for the socio-technological rearrangement of society-nature relations including, ultimately, “sustainability”.

China – as a globally entangled economy and major driver of global environmental change – shows the limits of these assumptions. Here, capital accumulation is linked with an entirely familiar cumulative growth in socio-ecological problems, including, increasingly, consequences on a global scale and in different world-regions; but also in ways and with an extent, profundity and complexity that is in fact unprecedented. While it has been a constant refrain over the last 20 years, including amongst Chinese scholars and policymakers and their partners overseas, that China’s pollution and ecological problems are just a repeat of, for example, London’s “pea-souper” smogs in the 1950s, in fact they are qualitatively different.

As Sang-Jin Han and Young-Hee Shim (2010) note, while the developed “West” got to tackle “first” and “second” modernity sequentially, Chinese society is confronting both simultaneously. In other words, China faces the challenges of reducing poverty through industrialisation’s “first modernity” *and* the intensification of socio-ecological challenges of a “second modernity”, or the negative and global consequences produced by the success of the first modernity in the early industrialised nations. Indeed, today, with ubiquitous digitisation transforming Chinese society in particular, a “third modernity” (Blühdorn 2022) is now added to this set of challenges, emerging from the successes of the second modernity, in turn. One clear result is that, after 40 years of runaway environmental despoliation, these environmental challenges are also now singularly profound in China and have amassed on a global scale and with unprecedented speed.

It is unsurprising, then, that the way in which China experiences and goes about ecological modernisation is connected to but also divergent from Western experiences and epistemes, gainsaying Western expectations. From the begin-

ning, China's economic modernisation was conceived of as a process merging Western sources of capital and high-tech innovation systems with an overwhelmingly large pool of cheap and "industrious" labour (see Butollo 2014). The modernisation fetishism of the West accompanied its businesses as they expanded operations towards Chinese geographies of production, which promised to boost these firms' profits through enhanced market proximity. These Western companies also held the utterly flawed assumption that the Chinese market could be easily "domesticated" not only to internalise the ecological externalities of Western production chains but also progressively to adopt the ideological underpinnings and "ordering" dynamics of Western neoliberalism.

If anything, however, it is increasingly clear that the adaptation has also occurred in the opposite direction (Tyfield 2018). The titanic dynamism of neoliberal globalisation has been harnessed by CCP-China to transform itself from a battered, little junk to a super-tanker (and still growing),³ dwarfing even the giant flagships of said neoliberal globalisation for which it posed no competition just decades ago – with this state-capitalist ship an altogether different type of vessel, demanding different global rules. In other words, here too we see that the case of contemporary China is manifestly not just a repeat performance, albeit on a bigger scale, of a drama long since mapped out and mastered in the West, but the emergence of something altogether new and with global significance.

EcoCiv as a political banner of the CCP instantiates perfectly the resulting mutations of ecological modernisation as a project of ecological *hypermodernisation* that is also, inevitably, "with Chinese characteristics". Here, "hyper" denotes a set of particular traits that distinguish Chinese ecomodernisation from that of the West, including the sheer scale and speed of the change that has taken place, and is likely to continue, in China, and its particularly vigorous "sci-tech" (*keji*) techno-fetishism.

But there is also the particular qualitative form adopted in recent years, albeit one that is readily traceable back through the entire history of the PRC, not least to "Mao's war against nature" (Shapiro 2001). Of course, what are thereby considered to be specifically "Chinese characteristics" are currently dictated overwhelmingly by the interests of the CCP, in what now seems set to become an increasingly rough environment of Sino-US competition over how to govern the manifold global challenges of the 21st century, from energy, food and fuel, to pandemics, cyberspace, wars, migration and climate, to name a few.⁴ Altogether, then, such Chinese characteristics are arguably now cul-

3 The article counterposes a "CCP-China", i.e. contemporary China as dominated top-down by the CCP and as surface phenomenon that is usually the presumed object of geopolitical discussion, with a "deep China", i.e. the bottom-up reality of the collective life of actual Chinese citizens. The latter term thus resonates with, but does not draw specifically on, the "deep China" described by Kleinman et al. (2011).

4 As we revise this paper, China has pulled out of its bilateral forums with the United States for discussing climate issues, inter alia, following Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.

minating in what one could call Xi's global and digital war against and for nature.⁵

China's environmental challenges today are the consequence of a total commitment to the "hard sciences" as the prime fixes for what the Chinese leadership has considered to be the nation's techno-ecological dysfunctions. It was Deng's Four Modernisations – of agriculture, science, industry and defence – that fired the starting gun for China's economic transformation to unfold under the auspices of the reform era since the late 1970s: surely the historical tale of the age in retrospect. Underpinning the epochal magnitude of this agenda's breakthroughs was the (entirely modern and literalistic) notion that both society and nature were objectively "out there" for the political leadership, and the businesses sprouting everywhere, to exploit as a means to bring back "wealth and power" to the nation (e.g. Yu 2015: 1056, Liu / White 2001).

Moreover, in contemporary China, it is the central party-state that is entrusted and required to keep control of what happens in the market, not vice versa. Yet it must not be forgotten that just as capitalism cannot stabilise, so too the capitalist nation state (which unquestionably now includes the PRC), the second building block above, cannot stabilise and is constantly looking for expansion, i.e. reproduction, of its power. Moreover, in China, with power explicitly concentrated in the hands of the party-state itself, not a (more-or-less dispersed) moneyed class separate from the state, these dynamics of nation-state self-preservation are particularly entrenched and unaccountable. This means, in turn, that China's environmentalism is hostage to a particularly growth-obsessed techno-fetishism of "innovation" (the third building block). And this model of innovation reflects decades of commercialisation of (public) science and consequent redefinition, explicitly now serving purely instrumental roles for political-commercial purposes, not intrinsic goals of scholarship, empirical science and (critical) thought.

This culture of governing, with science so dependably obedient, translates into a unique approach of (singularly determined) attempts to scientise problems, drawing on and granting epistemic and political authority to reductionistic understandings of both hard science disciplines (Shapiro / Li 2021: 151) and, paradoxically, of Chinese culture itself. The COVID-19 pandemic (and the "zero COVID" policy orthodoxy that has taken shape) has only contributed to cementing this trait, mobilising both biotech capacity and the increasingly-digitised machine of the Chinese state in a quest to provide total social order. This leads to another trait of eco-hypermodernisation, namely the unquestioned

5 In other words, a frank and concerted return to the Maoist model but now updated, reflecting China's current situation, domestically and in the world: one of global ambitions and influence; digital technological prowess as the pre-eminent means at its disposal; and being "for" nature, not just (if still) against it, in the sense of saving the planet but by disciplining it properly and with all due effort (as opposed to the default complacent, Western, capitalist approach of presuming nature may be simply ignored as an externality; or, indeed, the utopian Western green approach of seeking to "save nature" regardless of the impact on society and its political institutions).

principle to protect societal life, understood as the main source of stability, above protecting the actual life of the individual. Human life is thus not protected for life's sake but rather for its collective, indeed political and strategic, value.

Hence, the baton of eco-modernisation has been picked up and given a rocket boost by a singularly massive and powerful political project (namely the CCP, with its commitment to national rejuvenation), but one that has also inverted the valence of market and (party-)state implicit in the original formulation of that programme. And it has done so through a top-down party-state presiding over an ascendant superpower. In short, EcoCiv as a CCP project cannot be thought of separately from its forebear of neoliberal eco-modernisation, but nor can it be conflated with it, since it is now advancing yet further, quantitatively *and qualitatively*, the three building blocks of that dysfunctional and planet-threatening economic, institutional and techno-cultural order in ways with which eco-modernisation cannot compete. The prospects of EcoCiv delivering any future deserving of that title thus could hardly be more contradictory.

The hypergrowth of yet another death machine

As such, the emergence of China as a global agent of ecological hypermodernisation augurs much more and worse than simply a repeat of the last forty years of environmental despoliation by a globalising neoliberalism. For the shift in primacy from market to (party-)state most likely spells an even greater concentration of unaccountable power committed to the economisation of life. And it is ultimately power, not money per se (except insofar as we mean the “power of money”, or the power money can buy),⁶ that is definitive in shaping socio-technical and socio-natural trajectories. Similarly, the challenges, emergent paradoxes and dysfunctions of attempts to drive sustainable transition while preserving the structural building blocks of the contemporary socio-political order are even greater and starker in the case of China and its official EcoCiv programme. In particular, as a growing literature has now begun to document, China's environmental authoritarianism and, conversely, authoritarian environmentalism is likely to serve up ever more and deeper challenges (Li / Shapiro 2020).

This development needs to be situated in a longer historical perspective. Five hundred years of Western coloniality/modernity (Quijano 2000) have unleashed an unprecedented period of creative destruction, in which a resurgent “life” of a newly human(ist) civilisation or “culture” – universal in theory, violently differentiating in practice – expanded at the cost of a “nature” presumed

6 In other words, what money can and cannot buy and thus make happen is open to regulation (e.g. electoral finance laws) by way of specific arrangements of power, often on moral grounds (e.g. Sandel 2012). But what power can and cannot make happen can only be shaped by contestation at the level of power itself.

external and inert. In its own ways, the prospect of a CCP global hegemony is, instead, destructively creative, at the cost of the death of both nature *and* culture, in the sense of a free, creative society.

Indeed, as the threat of global environmental change, and ensuing socio-environmental disruption and even catastrophe, looms ever larger, the CCP programme of environmentalism is itself likely to wield ever more Draconian interventions to the point that it – itself – begins to embody the destructive power of climate emergency, or rather the broader and unprecedented planetary-civilisational crisis of which climate change is the most striking manifestation. As such, the PRC will increasingly inhabit a transparently self-contradictory stance, as a self-styled global preserver of life while acting as a *de facto* global (co-)accelerator of death. Moreover, popular acceptance of any such new hegemony, however destructive or oppressive it proves in practice, will in large part succeed, to the extent that it does, not in spite of but precisely because it goes under the banner of Ecological Civilisation.

From a domestic perspective, first, the parallel emergence under Xi Jinping since 2012 of a newly strident “authoritarian environmentalism” (Li / Shapiro 2020) overlapping with an increasingly pervasive expansion of digital totalitarianism (Strittmatter 2019) marks a distinct socio-political break with the entire Reform period since 1978. In this new reality, CCP leaders “save the environment” by dispensing death directly to the ways of life of (non-Han) nomads, and so indirectly to the people and subjects themselves (Yeh 2005). Rural/urban inequality and intra-urban inequality of rural migrants continues to grow unabated and barely addressed (Rozelle and Hell 2021). There is a new determination from Party leadership to wrestle back totalised control over urban conviviality and protest, including of what was seemingly an emergent, vibrant – and specifically green and digital – public sphere (Yang / Calhoun 2007, Geall 2013) and civil society. And official claiming and distortion of Chinese thought regarding human-human and human-nature “harmony” proliferates as transparently political propaganda, uninterested in any genuine cultural revitalisation (Zhuang 2015).

In short, with qualitatively multiplied assistance of digital technologies and their increasingly omnipresent intermediation and Party control, the actuality of EcoCiv within China is shaping up to be simply the determined super-application of top-down control, as exceptional political machine, in an attempt to manage what are intrinsically complex – and hence participatory, experimental – socio-environmental challenges of collective government. There is, therefore, little that is fundamentally “eco” about the (to date, mostly domestic) actuality of EcoCiv. Rather, EcoCiv has thus far been advanced as an environmentally-mediated civilising project (Smyer Yü, in this issue); “civilising”, and thence “civilisational” (Zuev et al. 2019), in the sense of disciplining the masses according to what the

party-state knows is best for all involved (i.e. especially the continuation of that far-sighted party-state rule).

EcoCiv is manifestly not, therefore, a policy committed to the genuinely vital or protean revitalisation of Chinese contemporary society or Chinese civilisation; let alone to any living, re-emergent reconnection with more plural, non-governmental sources of Chinese thought and culture. This is the case notwithstanding all the repeated use to which strident nationalist sentiment is put, including the exaggeration in reference to “(more than) 5,000 years of (unbroken) history” (e.g. NPC 2013, Xi 2017, cf. Economist 2020). Ironically, and to the very contrary, such a political programme is again a radical mutation of fundamentally foreign – i.e. modern, Western – social ideas regarding civilisation-as-modernisation. In this light, EcoCiv is thus a project of techno-economic advancement together with growing nation-state power, albeit with the balance and means-end relationship between these two inverted in favour of the latter.

Meanwhile, parallel dynamics are becoming increasingly evident both domestically and globally. Most obviously and superficially, although oftentimes glossed with green discourse, the BRI until recently was massively exporting infrastructure to perpetuate coal power across the world (now export of coal infrastructure has been formally abandoned in light of the resulting political criticism from abroad) and continues to cement ties with oil interests in the Middle East and focus on mega-infrastructure projects that are premised on contemporary high-carbon globalisation. Indeed, this has elicited growing push-back from activist groups and regulating bodies in host nations, with notable success in the case of Ghana and Costa Rica, for instance (Bressa 2020, Poulden 2013). Moreover, all this activity is based on a domestic energy sector that remains structurally dependent for the foreseeable future on coal (Tyfield forthcoming), regardless of premature prognoses of “peak coal” (Green / Stern 2017), as the post-Covid stimulus (Gao 2020) and 14th FYP (Shi 2021) have demonstrated.

Once it is understood that the key and non-negotiable feature of contemporary Chinese politics is the preservation and strengthening of the CCP, however, then one can understand not only *what* the official policy discourse of EcoCiv actually is or means, but also *how* it works and why it has begun to persuade international institutions (such as UNEP, the UN Environment Programme) of its seeming transformational value at different scales. Specifically, one can see clearly the pragmatic efficacy and strategic advantages of the political certainty of the one-party-state system, and its singular relationship to uncertainty.

“Political certainty” here connotes the exceptional strategic plasticity of means made possible for a political (state) project when its ends are unequivocally defined for all involved: so long as the goal is sufficiently clear and itself beyond argument or reasoning, almost anything goes in terms of means, and certainly rationalist expectations of synchronic coherence, diachronic consistency and accountability of actions may be readily ignored or abandoned without loss.

Indeed, in this context, what one says (or promises or contracts) can legitimately be taken to matter only insofar as what that does or makes happen and how that outcome contributes to strategic advancement of the ultimate (and partisan) goal.⁷ This is a condition that CCP-China enjoys – in that the continuation of unrivalled and unquestioned CCP domination of the Chinese polity is clearly understood by all as the ultimate non-negotiable goal of all decision-making – and of which it takes full advantage.

Moreover, such political certainty is particularly significant given the specific context of major uncertainties, amidst the global system dysfunction in which CCP-China is operating today and to which it itself contributes. For instance, such is the constitutive complexity of climate action that actually demanding accountability according to previous norms of, for instance, a clear and medium-term plan would be – is proving, in fact – utterly paralysing. This paralysis then becomes even more intractable where, as is almost guaranteed, there are also value differences in play, regarding the goals of political action and the (entirely speculative, as future) positive outcome to which climate action should be working.

Conversely, if the unknowable future socio-environmental good can itself be discounted and sidestepped because the goal is taken care of by communal commitment to a clearly defined political project, here and now, then such uncertainty is no longer debilitating. Instead, it may be altogether ignored and simply accepted as the arena for further strategic action. Indeed, such a political project can even then itself sow and profit from increased uncertainty, since this unilaterally weakens its competitors. And this also further cements unipolar commitment amongst its loose affiliates to the single clear goal as a singular source of certainty and ontological security (cf. Levitsky / Ziblatt 2019 on the dynamics of the emergence of autocracy, based on commitment to the (likely capricious) personality of the leader, not to any intelligible principle or accountable facts). As a result, the CCP may readily present itself as impressively competent, far-sighted and capable of decisive action, including on such urgent but tricky issues as climate, in ways that its (ideological) competitors are not.

As such, the CCP can, and does, readily deploy a maximal flexibility in the discourse, and indeed in the broader governmental means, that it uses, in full knowledge that the primary consideration is what such discourse *does* – in terms of building legitimacy and support and/or undermining criticism and resistance – not what it actually *says*. The increasingly well-documented, though

7 Of course, this situation resonates strongly with the central “post-truth” condition of digital or “third modernity” regarding the primacy of political action and manoeuvring of (governmental or policy) statements and public discourse – what they *do* – over accountability for the coherence of political positions, amongst themselves or with observable outcomes – what they *say*. Since the power/knowledge contestation is, by definition, endless, there is never any need – or, indeed, possibility – of being ultimately held to account. A pervasive and deepening public cynicism that accepts this game then simply locks it, and its new rules of “no rules”, in.

barely concealed, discrepancy between international, foreign-language and domestic, Chinese-language discourses on such contested geopolitical issues as resource diplomacy (Rodríguez 2018), digital technologies (Hannas / Tatlow 2020) and, indeed, environmental policy and EcoCiv (e.g. Smyer Yü, this issue) is perhaps the clearest example of this profound, and effective, political pragmatism. Here, the Chinese discourse may be frank – even stentorian – in affirming an aggressively nationalist, authoritarian and security-focused agenda, while the international discourse makes vague, but richly suggestive and reassuring, nods towards inclusivity, global community, environmental responsibility, etc. The latter can thus “win friends” while the former single-mindedly builds the power needed actually to “influence”, and no contradiction between these two need ever be experienced as problematic or cause for pause. On the contrary, they will increasingly seem a demonstrably winning formula.

In this context, then, the problem with (real, existing) EcoCiv is not just that it enables the continued duplicity of massive ecological destruction in the name of “saving the planet”. It also acts as a Trojan horse for the smuggling in of the global hegemony of the CCP, potentially fatally undermining the broader “life” of any global democratic civil society that could muster a viable challenge, for a “just transition”, to its distinctly non-ecological project (cf. Wainwright / Mann 2018 on “climate Mao”).

Rethinking EcoCiv beyond the party-state

The official national project of Ecological Civilisation is thus perhaps best conceived as the *reductio ad absurdum* – and as a matter of historical, not merely abstract and philosophical, urgency – of the conflation of civilisation as (hyper-)modernisation that is characteristic of the entire project of (Western) modernity. And yet the negative – deeply troublesome – actualisation of such a project cannot be placed entirely upon the CCP. Rather, deeper conceptual investigation brings out immanent problems of EcoCiv in its constituent concepts of “ecological” and “civilisation”, i.e. with both as modern Western concepts themselves. But it is not just the problems but also the potentials for “ecological civilisation” that thereby become apparent. This section and the next thus trace the more positive reading of ecological civilisation immanent in contemporary Chinese society. Our first step is thus to introduce this conceptual work. Here, the Chinese words *sheng* and *wen* not only expose the deep-seated problem of “ecological” and “civilisation” respectively, but also show themselves to be more promising concepts vis-à-vis a trans-modern ecological civilisation.

In contemporary Chinese, “ecological” is translated as *shengtai* (生态). This two-character term is one of a great many early twentieth century neologisms

taken from Japan, where the challenge of updating the character-based language to meet the threat of Western modernisation had a head-start of several decades. *Shengtai* thus comprises two elements, co-opted for these new and essentially defensive purposes: *sheng* (生) or “life” in the sense of natural reproduction, giving birth etc.; and *tai*, meaning “attitude” but made use of as a suffix connoting the abstract noun or “-ness”.

Our focus here, however, is on the etymological root of this Chinese word: *sheng*. As Wang Mingming (2019, see also Wang 2014) has persuasively argued, built around *sheng*, the term *shengtai* in Chinese actually has a much stronger and still perceived connection to “life” than does either of the terms connoting “life” à la life science – i.e. the most consequential forms of relation to issues of “life” today – in contemporary English, namely eco- and bio-logy. Each of these words is now a commonplace word, which has assumed its own specific meanings, enabling their disconnection over time from the ancient Greek etymology. As a result, the dominant mode of thinking about “life” in modern Western culture bears the marks, in its very terminology, of a specific historical trajectory dominated by the scientific gaze, with life as an object to be studied (Rodríguez 2021: 276). In other words, today in many European languages and cultures, the phenomenon follows and is subsidiary to the discipline (e.g. ecological-ecology), not any longer, nor common-sensically, vice versa.

Moreover, the ancient Greek terms themselves in any case lack the same vibrant, vital connection to “life” of *sheng* in Chinese. The “eco” of ecological actually comes from the Greek for home or household (*oikos*), also translated and thought of as the “environment”, and so has limited obvious connection specifically to issues of life. Its clear connection to “economy” further complicates this connection, and especially given the position of “economics”, and of a transparently growth-oriented (and life-disregarding) sort, as the supreme disciplinary lens of the modern world.

Meanwhile, the “bio” of biology does explicitly derive from words connected with other ancient Greek word of “bios”, or “life” (ibid.). And yet the “life” thus conceived is simply a “bare life” (cf. Agamben 1998) of that which is animate and self-generating, thought of in explicit contradistinction to the “life” of humanity, its cultures and its values. Such considerations contrast even more starkly with the effect of *sheng* on *shengtai* in contemporary Chinese, with the former still in everyday use (e.g. “birthday” is *shengri*). While “ecology” is thus the study of the entirely modern concept of the “ecological”, *shengtai* is unequivocally “life-ness” (and hence as both a premodern and, potentially, trans-modern concept).⁸

Indeed, so complete is the inversion in valence between “economising” and “life-ising” implicit in *sheng* vs. “eco”, that business/trade is *shengyi* (生意) in

8 And the discipline of “ecology” (*shengtaixue*) is “life-ness study”. Similarly, in Chinese biological/biology too has the *sheng* root, as *shengwu(xue)*, literally “living things (study)”.

Chinese, which also literally means (and is still used to mean) “tendency to grow” or “life and vitality”, hence incorporating “economics” to “life” not vice versa. In short, *sheng(tai)* is a richer – more “live-ly” or “life-ising” – concept for “ecological civilisation” than is the English word “ecological” itself.

More important still, though, is the fuller meaning of “life” in the Chinese concept of *sheng*. While one must be wary of romanticising and/or orientalisising in such discussion, *sheng* is situated within a broader conceptual network of “nature” as *tiandi* (“heaven and earth”)⁹ and *tianren heyi* – “harmony of heaven and humanity”. Here, then, “life” or *sheng* is a form of life, or way of going on as a living being, that remains in balance despite never being stable, let alone progressing to ever-greater order (as with modernity/modernisation). Rather it is “life giving life to life” (Wang 2019), with the very circularity of definition (and hence, apparently confounding meaninglessness) actually supremely significant in signalling that which is irreducible and ungraspable: hence (to live) life is primary, not to *know* life (and so own and/or control it, from outside and at arm’s length), as against the objective gaze of modernity, which systematically prioritises the latter.

Moreover, this “life” is not presumed to be exclusively “natural” as opposed to social/cultural as in the modern Western conceptualisation. Hence, for example, the profound (but much neglected) significance in premodern China to social flourishing and living social order of *not* the Emperor but rather the diversity of peoples moving amongst rural villages and cities, living at the periphery of the imperial political system amongst “mountains and forests” (*shanlin*), “rivers and lakes” (*jianghu*),¹⁰ and mediating between humanity and the spirits of the earth (Wang 2019, Zhao 2021). In this non-dualistic “life” of nature-society, we also find, therefore, strong connections to the Chinese concept of “civilisation”, or rather “culture”, of *wen* (文).

Regarding Ecological Civilisation, the term civilisation is translated here as *wenming* (文明). Like *shengtai*, however, this two-character term is also a neologism, compounding, updating and seemingly reinforcing the – for millennia, culturally central – (single-character) concept of *wen*. Often placed in duality (yin and yang) with the *wu* (武) of Chinese martial arts (*wushu*), *wen* connotes a virtue of literary culturedness, seen as the summit of human sensitivity and erudition, both intellectual/artistic and practical/pragmatic. Clearly, there remains immanent in this conception a strongly evaluative preference for the urban-as-literary life. And yet here too, appreciation of (what we might now call) “nature” was likewise considered a crucial mark of such culturedness; for instance, in terms of the appreciation of landscape painting or poetry on natural

9 As opposed to the word for “nature” *ziran* (自然), or literally “that which self-corrects or is as it is”, the term used in modern science and university departments.

10 The online Mandarin Chinese dictionary Pleco, defines *jianghu* as “rivers and lakes – people wandering from place to place and living by their wits, e.g. fortune-tellers, quack doctors, itinerant entertainers, etc., considered as a social group”. *Shanlin* has the same connotations.

or bucolic themes, art forms that reached heights of sophistication with global civilisational significance at various points in pre-modern Chinese history.

Compared to both “ecological” and “civilisation”, therefore, *sheng* and *wen* capture a profoundly different and more promising, as not foundationally modern and chauvinistically rationalist, ethos or relation to the world. Yet this turn to non-official Chinese concepts also comes with its own problems. Specifically, modern interpretations of these very terms creep too readily even into the newfound appreciation for such ideas.

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of that disjuncture in understanding that is systematically glossed over is the centrality throughout different streams of Chinese thought of the spiritual and cosmological, epitomised in the concept of *tian* (天) or “Heaven(s)”. Too often references to *tian* and cognate concepts are seamlessly co-opted simply to a modern concept of “nature”. This illegitimate oversight, however, is of central importance regarding what political and polemical use can and cannot be made of Chinese concepts while remaining honestly committed to understanding those ideas, especially regarding issues of (natural and/or social) “life”.

In particular, consider the striking contrast between the figure of the Emperor and the modern CCP (as “organisational Emperor”; Zheng 2009). Both occupy the central and supreme position in their respective hierarchical political orders with, in theory, unchallengeable top-down authority. But while the “good Emperor” ideally stays out of the lives of the people, the Party has both the right and the duty to intervene as much as it deems necessary for the (bio-political) “health” of the state. And this profound difference hinges on the fact that the former’s role is to mediate effectively the relation between the entire society and the Heavens, which may then be entrusted to oversee socio-environmental flourishing and to whom the Emperor is himself in turn accountable (notably via the “mandate of Heaven”, 天命). Conversely, the Party has no higher authority to which it must answer (other than, in principle, the “people” of which it claims to be sole representative), and thus has total (self-entitled) power and responsibility for all matters in the life of the state.

Like the Emperor, the freely moving peoples of *jianghu* were also understood to help administer social order in actual society in large part in their capacity as itinerant shamans, fortune-tellers and quacks, with one foot firmly in the (distinctly non-modern) world of spirits and cosmic forces of nature (viz. “rivers and lakes”). Without the crucial concept of *tian*, in other words, other concepts of “traditional” Chinese thought not only lose their meaning but become patsies for an altogether alien and opposed (i.e. modernist, secularised) conception of civilisation.

The reinsertion of *tian*, however, is no trivial matter. To the very contrary, the entire arch of the past 500 years, with the “rise of the West”, is one marked by the exceptional world-constructing productivity of the demolition of all such

faith in a cosmic order and instead questioning everything. Modernisation is the process and age of total disillusionment and disenchantment. Such cosmic alienation is not so easily undone. It is, moreover, a civilisational predicament and process, not just a personal decision.

Viewing the planetary imperative of “ecological civilisation” with the potential of non-official Chinese concepts thus signals with particular clarity that the root problem of the Anthropocene is not, in fact, humanity’s relation to the “Earth” or “nature” at all but to the “Heavens” (cf. Hui 2017), in the sense of a human-nature-cosmos balance. And yet how does this realisation take us beyond a simple restatement of the problem? Several centuries of systematically disillusioned critical rationalism – and the “Death of God” in the West, experienced as both exile *and* liberation – cannot be simply waved aside with the wish that things were otherwise. Similarly, in China, there are profound and irreversible historical reasons for the cultural supersession of *sheng* and *wen* (connected to *tian*) and their respective updating as *shengtai* and *wenming*.

Indeed, this non-statist way of socially organising life is largely destroyed in contemporary China, deliberately so in many places by the upheaval of the political campaigns of the CCP in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet such cultural practices have not been entirely eradicated, whether from collective memory or from the deep structures of Chinese language and thought. And this history is itself richly suggestive of a strikingly different form of relation to “nature” that remains immanent in Indigenous¹¹ Chinese thought – and potentially in the (now CCP-cultivated) resurgent thirst for, and pride in, that tradition.

Specifically, with its deep, if buried, connection to ideas such as *tianren heyi* and *tiandi*, *sheng* still resonates with concepts of “life” that are profoundly amodern. Such understanding asserts and seeks to work with an essentially mysterious self-propelling character of life. This, in turn, marks striking contrast with the “naturalised” scientific concepts of “bio” or “eco”, which have come to settled connotations that tend to deny the “life of life” and aim instead to master and control it. This contrast also highlights how these concepts ground and found the essentially modern (and Western-originating, or at least rationalistic) political project of the state as site of total control, i.e. as the ultimate custodian and incarnation of the power/knowledge paradigm of modern rationality, which is so planetarily lethal because it *never has had* a conception of the life it subordinates and exploits as *sheng* (i.e. as “life”).

As such, *sheng* and *wen*, separately and even more so together, speak promisingly to a conception of life that is monistic, not dualistic, and hence respectful of life’s own dynamics, not prioritising human rational knowledge of them, even as life includes the latter but not vice versa. That is also then to adopt a

11 We capitalise this word to signal that the term does not refer to the ethnic but rather to the socio-political and historical conditions of being Indigenous.

relational stance in the engagement with life, and with the thinkers themselves who are part of and “within” life, not seeking to reach and assert perfect objective understanding of a phenomenon that is dualistically posited and is thus treated as external to the enquiring subject. By contrast, the foundational step of cosmic alienation, with the disillusionment with and dissolution of “heaven”, underpins the entire prevailing paradigm of scientific modernity.

A reengagement with *tian*, however, is perhaps not so out-of-reach, if we can apply our philosophical imaginations. For one can credibly resituate *tian* by pursuing a phenomenological approach that sees it as simply the essential yet mundane mystery of the (actualised and experientially undeniable capacity for) self-conscious connection to our relatedness to any and all things (cf. Rosa 2019); the self-awareness that is both the irreducible ground of our specific relationships with and interdependence on all other things (as “selves” and “others”) and our own intimate and most precious participation in (the whole of) *life*.

This then manifests in a shift from the primacy of “worldview” – or one’s conception of the seemingly objective world-out-there, which, when (mis)understood as primary, becomes and supports the view of the eviscerated, ghostly subject on an inert, de-animated objective world and *bios* – to “lifeview” (Schweitzer 1923/1955), or the first-person view *of life* on other life/living beings and the always-alive possibility of what one may achieve amidst this dynamic and only imperfectly knowable (as itself likewise living) context. Such a lifeview, thus, in its very perspective manifests an ethical “reverence for life” (Schweitzer 1965) not least by acknowledging the constant perceptual creativity of the human mind, social and personal, as *within* “life”, not set against it, and expressive of its ongoing evolution.

Moreover, reconnecting with *tian* in this way also thereby resituates *sheng* and *wen*, effecting a broader reorientation for a more general “life-ising” of social and political life/order/institutions. Such reflections, in other words, underpin precisely a reconnection with, and reabsorption in, both life itself (*sheng*) and a culturedness of balanced pragmatic sensitivity (*wen*) that together manifest a newly respectful and self-conscious relatedness that is itself ecological civilisation.

A germinating notion of *shengtai wenming* as an alternative movement for transition

Our first step has thus mapped out a new conceptual territory for, and inspired by, ecological civilisation as *shengtai wenming*. Just as important, however, is how, against the formal project of EcoCiv critiqued in earlier sections, these conceptual explorations open up the possibility of an entirely different – indeed, fundamentally opposed – bottom-up emergent process of Sino-global societal transformation.

The search for evidence of any burgeoning movement of *shengtai wenming* in contemporary China, however, must proceed on noticeably different grounds to the directly-empirical dominant “common-sense” approach. The latter proceeds by looking for Chinese examples (domestic and/or overseas, e.g. in the BRI) of initiatives of ecological innovation or infrastructure that appear to tick many, if not every, box for the criteria expected by contemporary Western transition studies in order to be classed as world-leading. Such criteria include the delivery of unprecedented impacts on decarbonising social systems and ways of life, decoupling the growth of economies and their environmental impact – all while developing newly greened social mores and enabling protocols and/or institutions of deepening democratic participation.

But also relevant, and arguably more important, are issues such as low-tech and low-cost environmental innovations, and infrastructural and socio-technical projects, that are premised on and cultivate explicitly respectful and connected relations to nature (vs. so-called “nature-based solutions”) and initiatives that deliberately target gains for both “nature” and “society” as inseparable; cultures of social and business entrepreneurship or “self-efficacy” (Rosa 2019) more generally; and a broad category of what may be called growing civilisational self-confidence. As *shengtai wenming*, hence a “living civilisation of life”, what matters primarily is evidence of this quite different sort, and with the “full package” or “finished product” a prima facie unlikely prospect, such evidence is still yet to crystallise and emerge. Here, then, we should instead be looking for signs of dynamism – and hence possibly rapid, ongoing and uncertain change, perhaps through expedited societal learning processes – and evident convergence amongst diverse factors; perhaps even in the face of, or through processes of, increasing tension and antagonism.

Thus reframed, however, there is in fact considerable evidence of the striking dynamism of this irrepressible alternative movement of a bottom-up Sino-global *shengtai wenming*, even as it often requires careful interpretation and may even seem to present the opposite conclusion, especially when interpreted instead through the default (and constantly solidifying) lens of high political tension and tightening authoritarianism. Space here constrains anything but the most

cursory of overviews, though the issue certainly merits a much more comprehensive assessment; perhaps even the other articles of this Special Issue themselves can be (re)read from this perspective in order to both deepen and challenge these arguments with further new evidence.

By way of such initial illustration of the items listed above, however, starting with nature-oriented low-cost infrastructure, a notable example is the work of urban planner and landscape architect Kongjian Yu and his TuRenScape concept,¹² specifically regarding so-called “sponge city” flood defences. Yu (2021) notes the catastrophic and ubiquitous effects of massive “grey” (i.e. concrete-based) water and flood-defence infrastructures across contemporary urban China that aim to channel water as quickly as possible out of urban areas. This default engineering-centric approach – which, to repeat, has reached unprecedented heights in contemporary China – manifests the high-modern, massive construction approaches characteristic of the CCP. Crucially, though, and evidence of the profound weaknesses of the CCP’s seeming decisiveness, this approach has simply failed. Sixty-five percent of Chinese cities (including several megacities) remain vulnerable to inundation, with massive and pervasive problems of water (and other) pollution.¹³

In response, Yu has explicitly worked in the opposite direction, developing ways, based on ancestral methods of Chinese agricultural water management, that aim to keep the water – “which is life!” (Yu 2021) – in situ by building up and redeveloping natural parks that are low-cost to build and maintain, with “nature doing the work” on its own terms (*ibid.*). Yu’s work is also noticeably global in its projects (with 500 projects in more than 200 cities, overwhelmingly in China but also across 10 other countries, including the United States) and its outlook. Yet even in its domestic work, his consultancy’s striking success in convincing local, municipal governments to adopt an approach diametrically opposed to the “hard science” orthodoxy of Party cadres is itself remarkable. Combined with the explicit referencing of the approach to its founding in Chinese practices and historically rooted techniques, not least in the prioritisation of widely accessible, low-cost and hence low-tech approaches, this work presents an example of “life-ising” practice in contemporary Chinese ecological initiatives.

None of this is to say that Yu’s work, or the actual sponge city or park projects he has been involved in building in China, are exemplary, let alone perfect. To be sure, they remain, as would all infrastructure projects, firmly embedded in the hugely suboptimal power-knowledge relations of contemporary China and its systems of governance. They are also, however numerous, mere specks on the massive Chinese landscape and hence hugely constrained in terms of what actual benefits they can provide regarding flood defences. Moreover, even

12 See <https://www.turenscape.com/en/home/index.html> (accessed 20 July 2021).

13 The terrible floods in Henan of July 2021 graphically illustrated this danger as we originally wrote these words.

with several decades of thought and experience behind them, they are still relatively recent and largely the result of the ingenuity and imagination of one entrepreneurial person. Yet, as argued above, ecological civilisation is living or it is merely an empty slogan. And if it is living, it must – can only – develop and strengthen and unfold over time, organically and immanently, and with no previously existing blueprint. The very inadequacies of existing sponge city projects, thus, offer no counter-evidence and may even be interpreted as supportive of our case, so long as one can witness a relentless process of dynamism and learning, which is indeed clearly in evidence.

Secondly, regarding mass Chinese adoption of similarly low-cost but also “green” innovations, a growing literature has detailed precisely such processes, whether in energy (Gosens et al. 2020, Urban et al. 2016), agriculture (Ely et al. 2016) or mobility (Tyfield / Zuev 2018). Regarding the last, in particular, while the headlines on this score regarding China often focus on its global lead as the largest national market for electric cars (and buses), there are other, arguably more important, stories that are not so high-profile. These concern the miscellany of smaller electric vehicles (EVs), on two, three or four wheels, that have long become the primary form of demotic automobility across China, especially in the less-wealthy or populous cities (Zuev et al. 2019).

Indeed, recent evidence confirms that while the majority of electric cars have been sold in the larger cities that dominate news stories, the appetite for and changing (i.e. positive) attitudes towards EVs (particularly these smaller models) are strongest in these lower-tier cities (Huang et al. 2021). The prospect of a bottom-up emergence in such places of an entirely new model of urban mobility – not just electric, but connected and shared – that is also, crucially, low-cost and thus potentially relevant to the burgeoning urban centres across the Global South, remains a live possibility. Meanwhile, the hi-tech version being actively pursued by governments and car manufacturers alike continues to stutter and struggle (e.g. over access to contested mineral resources, which foster unequal relations of exchange on a global scale).

Thirdly, while not (yet) substantiating a “critical mass” and breakthrough cultural shift, there is certainly significant evidence of a broader cultural movement in China today of entrepreneurs motivated by spiritual-ecological goals or vocations. As Leigh Martindale documents (2019, 2021), for instance, in his study of organic farms that provide digitally-intermediated direct B2C sales of “safe” (viz. Yan 2012) organic produce, the dynamism of this sector resides upon this yearning for reconnection with the land/nature and an edifying simplicity of life amongst the entrepreneurs and their armies of (generally young and well-educated) volunteer workers – a longing also evident in Chinese tourism and travel, not least domestically, amongst both young and old (Xu / Wu 2016). Moreover, noticeable amongst these groups is not just a turning anew to long-standing Chinese thought and concepts for inspiration, but also and inseparably

a profound cosmopolitanism in the double sense of openness to new ideas and cultures and the possibility of remaining connected to, not retreating from, a plurality of (thinkable) urban spaces.

Furthermore, set against the titanic and relentless pressures and sociotechnical changes of contemporary Chinese life, this yearning is increasingly evident – and documented – as manifest in terms of a profound inner appetite for both significant socio-ecological learning, not least amongst those most disadvantaged and exposed to environmental risk (Huang et al. 2022), and for psycho-social development and serenity (Zhang 2020). Such an “inner revolution” (Zhang 2020), however, while unfolding now with great force and turbulence in countless Chinese individuals, is likely difficult indeed to find evidenced in any observable and major shifts in the infrastructural or power-relational presentation of its urban setting, especially insofar as one is focused on looking at such external manifestations judged against settled criteria of “positive” and “green” socio-political change.

To be sure, such (potentially positive and hugely productive) developments may seem dwarfed when set against the dominant reality in each context: the continued massive growth of concrete-based urbanisation, coal power and monumental infrastructure in China and increasingly overseas; the still-runaway growth of the fossil-fuel-powered vehicles and associated system of high-carbon urban automobility; the intensification of agriculture and buying up of farms and land across the Global South, etc. Similarly, the whole remains profoundly conditioned by the ever-tightening party-state surveillance and chauvinistic nationalism, on the one hand, and the hyper-consumerism of Chinese society, on the other.

Indeed, environmental concern, or the widespread prioritisation of “natural” or ecological life, may not yet be profound, and sincere and deep-seated demotic reconnection to the ecologically harmonious thought and practices rooted in Chinese cultures may remain comparatively minuscule and superficial. Nonetheless, an emergent Sino-global or global-Chinese civilisation seems vigorously untamed, however frail and small it currently appears. This is, moreover, an emergent social force that is profoundly enabled and energised by the emergent socio-technical, civilisational revolution of the digital in ways that mark a striking contrast to the threat of the digital-and-party-state as an agent of totalised control. In short, what is of the utmost significance regarding *shengtai wenming* is the liveliness and dynamism of this pre- and now trans-modern civilisation, not its green and/or democratic credentials per se. It is the (civilisational) *life* that must come first, and once this has been identified one finds it again and again.

Illuminated by conceptions of a living civilisation as the key starting place for any chance of emergent “ecological civilisation”, contemporary “deep China” (as opposed to the more visible state-led workings of “CCP-China”) does indeed

evidence rich, if still embryonic, potentiality for large-scale transition. Meanwhile, we can also trace the potential rediscovery and re-imagining of Chinese concepts of *sheng*, *wen* and their (novel) conjunction for this group of life-ising agents.

Conclusions: Principles for life-ising

China has an outsized significance regarding the overlapping planetary crises, centred on environmental emergency. The official policy initiative of Ecological Civilisation has attracted much interest, and many plaudits, globally. EcoCiv seems to feed a widespread appetite for a new age of post-industrial and post-Western-modernity reconnection, both to ecological concerns and to a longer history of human civilisation shorn of the self-congratulatory blinkers of modernist exceptionalism. Yet in exploring the emerging actuality of this official discourse, as China goes global, we have found instead dynamics that increasingly portend the exact opposite: a hypermodernisation that actually perfects the destructive dynamics of modernity in a deepening, totalising alienation not just of “culture” from “nature” but of humanity from itself and so from all things. Ironically, the very plausibility of EcoCiv as what the world urgently needs thereby serves, without any concerted effort, to advance this state project of total global surveillance by the CCP and/or other copycat state-corporate powers.

And yet in a specifically Sino-global ecological civilisation of *shengtai wenming*, there is clear potential for a global societal – or, rather, civilisational – paradigm shift to life-ising the economy instead of economising life. This is manifest in countless bottom-up, “under-the-radar” (Kaplinsky 2011) and neglected developments in and from China, that together have extraordinary dynamism on an unrivalled scale to drive a global learning process. This *shengtai wenming*, however, is premised upon a living practice of enacting a new, life-affirming and life-revering relation to the world – a “lifeview” – in the progressive collective emergence of a living civilisation of life.

Indeed, from this perspective, we may even return to reappraise the dauntingly negative story of the formal EcoCiv itself as it goes global. The “perfection” of hypermodern alienation that the CCP represents is now reaching exceptional – and global – intensity, economising life, both “natural” and “social”. Yet for life to prevail, and to be renewed, the great, culturally-seismic challenge is that it *must itself live*, and hence emerge spontaneously (if not necessarily “organically” or “naturally”), not be managed (or willed through “praxis”) rationally and intentionally into existence. Such emergence, however, is the result of intensifying pressures, compounding through moments of crisis to entirely unpredictable but qualitative phase changes – and the ongoing construction of a

political machine with unparalleled capacity for causing and delivering death spells precisely this inflection point, if nothing else.

Yet this is not only a supreme stimulus for a civilisational movement beyond modernity, increasingly at the global scale needed. It is also itself entirely asymmetrically dependent for its continuation on the converse vital dynamism of “deep China”. Even as the party-state’s hypermodernisation project grows parasitically upon this host, however, this dynamic situation is not indefinitely sustainable – indeed, not even for the medium-term of decades.

Moreover, the move from hypermodernisation through the *reductio* of eco-modernisation to the emergence of something else is only possible to the extent that this process takes place in and through a civilisation with a sufficiently capacious “hinterland”, or set of cultural civilisational resources, and with sufficient dynamism at a sufficient scale to be globally significant. And this is true not of China-as-CCP/PRC nor even of deep China per se, but only of the unique Sino-global constellation of contemporary China (in its diversity and richness and contradictoriness) with late Western modernity and deepening global encounter.

And yet even in this significantly revised – and more enabling – reading of the present predicament nothing can be taken for granted, with unprecedented stakes and daunting urgency still in play. Yet the present circumstances of contemporary China and its ongoing reconstitution of its relations to the world are not only a necessary condition for a more positive future. They also offer rich possibilities for thinking and doing transition. To close, then, we list a suggested set of four practical principles (drawing on Lent 2021 and Roy 2020) that could be actively adopted to assist and expedite this civilisational emergence.

1) First and foremost is the deliberate and persistent cultivation of the primacy of a “lifeview” perspective and relation to the world in every sphere of practical action, private and public, professional and political, and amongst ever-growing numbers of (influential) stakeholders. For this not only enacts the necessary reorientation of one’s activity towards repeated and habitual reaffirmation of life against the default mode that prioritises rational control. It also, and arguably more importantly, continually resituates oneself *within* the “life” that one is seeking to cultivate and help flourish. And thus positioned, one can then respond with maximal creativity and sensitivity to such options for life-affirming collective action and participatory collaboration as unforeseeably – inescapably so given a living and emergent context – arise. Such a perspective thus marks a striking contrast with the “cockpitism” (Hajer et al. 2015) of much transition thought, which seeks to guide the world through an unprecedented crisis to a just and flourishing future with minimal disruption and unique foresight and oversight. By contrast, *shengtai wenming* has optimal chances of emerging spontaneously and unpredictably through a progressive and increasingly dis-

persed reorientation to “life”, learning to roll with and surf on the crashing turbulence of disruption, not seeking to minimise and contain it.

2) Secondly, working with an understanding of living systems as symbiotic and interdependent, not instrumental, machinic and parasitic, a further principle would be to apply this conception also to the issue of civilisational life. This, in turn, would involve a prioritisation of approaches that consider a flourishing across scales of the “holarchy”, rather than seeing these scales as pitched in zero-sum competition. For example, other “transition” projects should be appraised for the extent to which they enable autonomous flourishing and resilience of subsidiary partners/stakeholders, not just of the leading (state and/or corporate) protagonist. This approach thus acknowledges the constitutive nature of contested relations of power/knowledge in constructing transition and the need for these to be thrashed out in creative ways that are inclusive of, and “life-giving” to, all parties, and in processes of collective learning-by-doing. Indeed, here civilisational life may thus be defined and even possibly measured in terms of the efficacy, inclusiveness and depth of such collective learning and (possibly new) institutions thereof.

3) Thirdly, with the gaze firmly on the prize of an emergent global and globally interdependent civilisational life – surely the stand-out political lesson of the pandemic – such globality should remain prioritised, seeing attempts to achieve purely *national* security in a changing and potentially hostile world as manifestly self-defeating. The ongoing rise of China, specifically, exposes as simple falsehood the idea of a China that exists purely within its own boundaries. Regarding the looming threat of an incipient “new Cold War”, which would massively frustrate coordinated global climate action, there remains an imperative of continued openness to Chinese partners. Such openness, moreover, need not be in conflict with new, clear constraints and demands (to deliver on point 2), e.g. on the CCP with regard to its activities overseas and/or regarding Chinese co-option of foreign technologies (Hannas / Tatlow 2020), or even quite explicit competition with Chinese parties and the PRC as a whole (Erickson / Collins 2021), especially if this can catalyse a “race to the top” as against the real prospects of an intensifying “race to the bottom”.

4) Fourthly, adopting a “life” perspective entails also according the privilege of unique life and agency to others, including non-human (and more-than-human) systems. As such, one must drop, or at least significantly loosen and qualify, the expectation that political processes and adversaries can be fully appraised on the basis of their explicit official pronouncements. To the contrary, for a living, emergent process of “civilisational life”, one should instead adopt a stance of a situated practical wisdom (or *phronesis*; Tyfield 2018) regarding such socio-political and essentially contested arenas. This thus involves working

always from the premise that the meaning of official pronouncements is not clear or settled but must be “made so” depending on what is done now, in the living present. While profound political differences then remain between the PRC and many would-be climate partners, this approach would at least condition a greater understanding by the latter for the constitutive political processes of the former. Conversely, as already noted, a transition perspective encourages the literalistic appraisal and critique of official policies and goals, against currently unrealistic expectations of democratic participation.

Finally, all four principles together also signal the crucial importance of vital and actively tended (if not necessarily caring) horizontal relations as necessary conditions for optimising the possibility of spontaneous and unplannable emergence vs. top-down, planned transition. In this light, Ecological Civilisation invokes and enables much more than a CCP-led plot for socio-technical transition on a global scale. Instead, ecological civilisation as in *shengtai wenming* emerges from the myriads of deeper, heterogenous and historically self-healing layers of innovation shaping deep China – and its expanding interconnections with the world. This particular notion of *shengtai wenming* is hence better understood as the life-focused, life-driven dynamics (themselves living and self-governing) of social flourishing and disruptive rebuilding within planetary boundaries and possibilities. Understood this way, ecological civilisation (qua *shengtai wenming*) holds the potential to connect with and vitalise the diversity of life-ising projects struggling to achieve full scale and speed while restoring and maximising political oxygen on and for the planet.

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