

Toward a More Beautiful China and Cleaner World: Understanding Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization

– *Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization in Chinese Practice and
Its Contribution to the World*

(Summary)

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So beautiful is our Planet Earth which is yet so fragile in equal measure! In centuries of industrialization, the human race, while creating enormous material wealth, has accelerated the grabbing of natural resources and broken the equilibrium of the ecosystems on Earth, resulting in increasing deep-rooted conflicts between humanity and nature. As we speak, the world is standing at a crossroads – when it comes to our resources and ecological environment, whether we drain the lake for fish or take the path of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature has become the big question of the times facing the whole world.

Great thoughts guide great practices. Since the dawn of the new era, China as the world's largest developing country has been witnessing historic achievements and changes in developing its ecological civilization. The key lies in the strong leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core and in the scientifically sound guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization. This important thought, which contains a profound love of the people, culture, and the world, combines theory with practice and connects the past with present-day realities. It is a profound exposition of the relationships between man and nature, conservation and development, the environment and people's livelihoods, and between China and the world. It is a crystallization of the in-depth pondering on the development of human civilization and the construction of a clean and beautiful world, providing a powerful ideological tool for building a beautiful China and a modernization which allows harmonious symbiosis between humanity and nature and the joint construction of a community of life for them.

Chapter I

The Historical Background and Rich Elements of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has taken the construction of ecological civilization as a fundamental plan for the sustainable development of the Chinese nation. It has been promoting in an integrated manner the Five-Sphere Integrated Plan and the Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy and vigorously promoting theoretical, practical, and institutional innovations in ecological civilization, having creatively put forward a series of new concepts, ideas, and strategies, forming Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization.

The formation of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization has a profound background of the times and distinctive historical characteristics. It is a science-based answer to the questions of our times, the world, and the people about the development of ecological civilization under the historical conditions of complex and profound changes in the world, countries, and societies.

Representing the understanding and summary of the laws governing the development of ecological civilization, Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization constitutes a comprehensive theoretical system integrating multiple disciplines including philosophy, history, economics, political science, sociology, and culture. This important thought contains a systematical exposition and interpretation of the relationships between humanity and nature, protection and development, the environment and people's livelihoods, and domestic and international relations. It encompasses such basic issues as fundamental guarantee, historical basis, basic tenets, core concepts, purposes and requirements, strategic path, system concepts, institutional safeguards, social forces, and global initiatives for developing ecological civilization in the new era.

Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization provides an in-depth answer, at the values level, as to why an ecological civilization should be built; at the cognitive level, what kind of ecological civilization is to be built; at the practice level, how to build such a civilization.

Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization is an open and inclusive

system of thoughts that is constantly enriched and improved as practice progresses in depth. At the National Conference on Ecological and Environmental Protection in 2023, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee Xi Jinping set out in clear terms the “four major transitions” – the development of China's ecological civilization in the new era necessitates major changes in emphasis from remediation to systematic governance, from reactive response to proactive action, from a participant in global environmental governance to a leader, and from practical exploration to scientific theoretical guidance. He also set out the Five Major Relationships, i.e., in continuing to advance ecological civilization in the new journey, one should handle well the relationships between high-quality development and high-level protection, between focusing on breakthroughs and coordinated governance, between natural recovery and human restoration, between external constraints and endogenous impetus, and between the “dual-carbon commitments” to carbon peaking/carbon neutrality and Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs). Combined with the Fourteen Commitments, they constitute an interconnected and organically unified whole, further encapsulating the essence, rich elements, and practical requirements of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization as a brand-new chapter in the innovative development of his thoughts on ecological civilization.

Based on the past and the present, Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization is oriented toward the world and the future. It advocates mutual learning among civilizations, harmonious coexistence, people-centeredness, green prosperity, systematic governance, and pragmatic cooperation; it contains a systemic exposition and explanation of the strategic positioning, goals and tasks, overall thinking, and major principles related to the development of eco-civilization; it is a crystallization of the profound insights into the development of human civilization, the building of a beautiful China, and the shaping of a clean and beautiful world.

Chapter II

China's Practice of Building Ecological Civilization

Since the onset of the new era, under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization, China has been upholding the concept that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets by unswervingly taking to the path of prioritizing ecology and green development and strengthening eco-environmental protection in all dimensions across the whole region and throughout the entire process. It has made solid strides in green and low-carbon development, improved ecological and environmental quality with remarkable results, and created miracles in ecological and green development that attract world attention. Through all this, China demonstrates vividly the immense power of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization.

China is dedicated to promoting the synergistic reduction of pollution and carbon emissions for better effect, continuing to push for the optimization and adjustment of the industrial structure, accelerating the clean and efficient use of energy, and sustaining the green transition in such areas as transportation and construction, bringing about a marked increase in the “green content” of economic development. It has continued to deepen its efforts to win the tough battle against pollution and persisted in using targeted, science-based, and law-based methods for pollution control to win the battle in defense of blue sky, clean water, and uncontaminated soil at a higher standard, resulting in a notable qualitative improvement of the eco-environment, ever-growing satisfaction of the people, and a significant increase in the “gold content” of the eco-environment.

Green has become the distinctive color of China in the new era; green development has become a prominent feature of Chinese modernization. China's practice in building eco-civilization has added more “China green” to the Earth and expanded the global map of greenery, benefiting both China and the world.

China has accelerated the green transition of its development mode. From 2012 to 2023, China supported its average annual economic growth at more than 6 percent with an annual energy consumption growth rate of 3 percent. Its energy consumption intensity dropped by 26.4 percent accumulatively, making China one of the countries in the world with the fastest decline in energy consumption intensity.

In September 2020, China declared to the world its aim to “peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060”, ushering China's ecological civilization development into a new stage with “carbon

reduction” as a major strategic direction.

China has demonstrated its determination to prevent and control pollution with “unprecedented vigor”. The report of the 19th CPC National Congress lists pollution prevention and control as one of the three major battles in the drive to build a moderately prosperous society. Under the leadership of the CPC Central Committee, China, making the resolution of outstanding ecological and environmental problems a priority area that concerns people's livelihoods, has launched an unprecedented massive campaign, including the three campaigns to keep skies blue, waters clear, and lands clean, producing a science-based, targeted and law-based approach to and related experience in pollution control and bringing a visible improvement in the quality of the eco-environment.

China has provided the world with a “Chinese solution” for ecological conservation and restoration. Since entering the new era, China has upheld a systems concept and proceeded from the holistic nature of ecosystems in dealing with the relationship between natural restoration and human restoration and in pressing ahead with the integrated conservation and restoration of mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, and desert ecosystems, with greater attention given to comprehensive, systemic and source-based governance. The ecological conservation and restoration of national territorial space have been experiencing “Four Transitions”, i.e., the progressive transitions from single elements to systems governance, from project-type measures as the mainstay to natural restoration, from end-point governance to whole-chain management, and from relying on government finance to emphasizing diversified inputs. Thus, a master plan for ecological conservation and restoration has been largely drawn up, covering a full range from mountain tops to the sea, from plateaus to the plains, and from the country to the local level.

China emphasizes revering, accommodating and protecting nature while actively promoting natural restoration. Adhering to the principle of having natural restoration as the mainstay, China fully respects and adapts to nature, follows the laws of the evolution of natural ecosystems, gives nature sufficient time and space for recuperation and regeneration, and relies on the power of nature to restore the equilibrium to ecosystems.

China emphasizes the scientific delineation of red lines for ecological protection. China has drawn areas with extremely important ecological functions, extremely fragile ecology, and potentially important ecological value, including integrated and optimized nature reserves, under red lines for ecological conservation, thus bringing important ecological spaces under control with a single system of protective red lines.

China has established a system of protective areas (PAs) mainly consisting

of national parks, putting more than 70 percent of wild giant panda habitats under protection.

China has strengthened the ecological conservation and systemic management of large rivers, important lakes and wetlands, and coastal zones; it has adopted a holistic approach to the conservation and systemic management of mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, and deserts and improved the quality and stability of the ecosystems. By the end of 2021, nearly 10,000 nature reserves of various levels and types had been established, accounting for more than 17 percent of the country's land area.

Given China's vast territory and complex natural conditions, ecological conservation and restoration dictate that an integrated account be taken of the integrity of ecosystems, the continuity of natural geographic units, the complexity of environmental elements, and the sustainability of socio-economic development and that the country should proceed from the laws governing natural ecosystem evolution and succession as well as internal mechanisms while taking measures and administering policies in light of the place and time, in different zones and classifications.

Given the realities, China has, since the beginning of the new era, adhered to a systems concept and implemented a series of major projects for the conservation and restoration of major ecosystems:

China has focused on bolstering the ecological conservation and restoration of important ecological barriers such as the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, Sanjiangyuan (Source of Three Rivers), and the Inner Mongolian Plateau as well as conserving the eco-environment of the Qinling Mountains, Qilian Mountains, Helan Mountains, and other ecological security barriers. The Shan-Shui Initiative in China was selected by the United Nations as one of the world's first 10 flagship initiatives for ecosystem restoration.

The classification and resource utilization of garbage, the Clean Your Plate Operation, the Nationwide Voluntary Tree-planting Campaign.... Since the beginning of the new era, China has actively promoted the value concept of eco-civilization, with the concept of eco-friendly living disseminated and extended to clothing, food, housing, transport, and travel in all aspects, forming a favorable atmosphere in which the society as a whole works in unison to promote green development.

Large-scale greening operations have been carried out across the national territory through a science-based approach. Over the years, a series of ecosystem restoration and management projects with significant ecological impacts have been launched, including the Three-Norths Shelter Afforestation Project (covering the northeastern, northern, and northwestern regions), natural forest

conservation and restoration, and restoring farmland to forests and grasslands (grain for green). China was the first country in the world to achieve zero net growth in land degradation and a double reduction in the total size of desertified land and sandified land, playing a positive role in achieving the global goal of zero growth in land degradation by 2030. China has contributed to a quarter of the world's newly added green areas since 2000.

Eco-civilization is a cause of the people, by the people, and for the people; everyone is a protector, builder, and beneficiary of our shared eco-environment. Since China entered the new era, General Secretary Xi Jinping has, on different occasions and from multiple perspectives, frequently elaborated in a comprehensive and systematic manner on eco-friendly ways of life, actively guiding the general public in practicing a green lifestyle.

Chapter III

The Institutional Guarantee for Building a Beautiful China

Only the implementation of the most stringent system and the enforcement of the most rigorous rule of law can provide a reliable guarantee for the development of eco-civilization. In its eco-civilization development endeavor since entering the new era, China has faced squarely the prominent problems in the environmental field by advancing the institutional reform of the ecological civilization system through top-level design, institutional innovations, and more robust rule of law, reshaping the institutional system relating to eco-civilization, bolstering the guarantee provided by the rule of law for building eco-civilization, and streamlining the ecological and environmental management and governance regimes.

In constitutional and institutional building, since the beginning of the new era, the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has persisted in an all-round layout, systemic structuring, and multi-level advancement, having incorporated into the Party Constitution the following statements: “The Communist Party of China leads the people in building a socialist ecological civilization” and “Enhancing the awareness that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.” In March 2018, the words “ecological civilization” were written into China’s constitution, realizing a high degree of coherence among the Party’s proposition, the national will and the people’s aspirations.^①

China has successively released for implementation the Opinions on Accelerating the Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Progress and dozens of specific reform programs. An eco-civilization system of a “Four Beams and Eight Pillars” nature has largely taken shape.

In building an eco-civilization system in the new era, China pays full attention to systems integration, synergy, and efficiency, encompassing not only the building of eco-civilization in all aspects including resource management, environmental supervision, and ecological compensation, but also all priority areas and various types of resources and environmental elements.

With regard to the rule of law, since the 18th CPC National Congress and under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization and

^① *Study Outline of Xi Jinping’s Thoughts on Ecological Civilization*, Xuexi Publishing House and People’s Publishing House, July 2022, p. 15.

Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law, China's strengthening of the rule of law for eco-civilization has entered a period of the strongest legislative efforts, the most stringent regulatory and law enforcement, and the most significant results from the implementation of the legal system.

The Environmental Protection Law, amended in 2014, establishes in the form of law the basic concepts, principles, and systems that must be followed in building an ecological civilization, clarifies the specific measures for increased legal sanctions against environmental violations, and establishes the systems of continuous daily penalties, environmental public interest litigation, and compensation for ecological and environmental damage, etc. The Civil Code adopted in May 2020 establishes the green principle as a basic tenet governing civil activities and dedicates a chapter to regulating environmental pollution and ecological damage. Individual laws on the eco-environment, including pollution prevention and control of the atmosphere, water, soil, and other ecological elements such as wetland protection and biosafety, have been comprehensively formulated and revised. Ten laws on ecological conservation and environmental protection have been rolled out one after another to fill the legislative gaps in related fields, covering various environmental elements and natural ecosystems such as mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, deserts, and other ecological systems, with the legal norms further clarified and specified.

China emphasizes enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement. Since the beginning of the new era, China has emphasized administration and enforcement according to law in the field of ecological conservation and environmental protection, pushed forward the legalization of institutions, functions, authorities, procedures, and responsibilities, and brought all law enforcement activities into the rule-of-law orbit; it has continuously stepped up law enforcement in the field of ecological conservation and environmental protection and has always maintained a high-pressure stance against environmental violations, forming a powerful deterrent.

With regard to building an ecological and environmental governance system, China has built an environmental governance system with the government taking the lead, enterprises forming the mainstay, and social groups and the public participating jointly. An environmental governance system is taking shape, characterized by clear guidance, scientifically sound decision-making, strong execution, effective incentives, diversified participation, and virtuous interaction.

At the responsibility level, the overall leadership of the Party has been strengthened with the establishment of a responsibility system that features comprehensive coverage, corresponding powers and responsibilities, clear rewards

and punishments, and interlocking linkages. At the regulatory level, China set up the Ministry of Natural Resources to uniformly exercise all responsibilities for the control of land use and ecological conservation and restoration; China established the Ministry of Ecology and Environment to uniformly exercise all responsibilities for the supervision and administrative enforcement of ecological pollution as well as urban and rural pollution and discharge. At the market level, the country has improved the system of market-oriented allocation of resources and environmental factors, and incorporated carbon emission rights, energy use rights, water use rights, and sewage disposal rights into the overall reform of market-oriented allocation of said factors. It has deepened the reform of the system of compensated use of natural resources and improved the mechanism for natural resource pricing.

China is continuing to deepen the institutional reform of the ecological civilization system. In respect of fundamental safeguards, it has consistently adhered to the overall leadership of the Party and continued to ensure political responsibility for eco-civilization. In goal orientation, it focuses on building a beautiful China, continues to improve and develop the ecological civilization system, and pushes ahead with the modernization of the national governance system and capacity in the field of ecology and environment in order to lay a solid foundation for essentially realizing the goal of building a beautiful China by 2035 and turning China into a completely beautiful country by the middle of this century. In terms of key directions, China is fully committed to carrying out all the tasks of deepening the reform of the ecological civilization system, improving the foundational system of ecological civilization, beefing up the ecological and environmental governance system as well as green and low-carbon development mechanisms. It will implement a sub-regional, differentiated, and precisely controlled eco-management system, improve the horizontal ecological protection compensation mechanism, implement fiscal, taxation, financial, investment and pricing policies and standard systems that support green and low-carbon development, and accelerate the planning and construction of a new type of energy system with a view to injecting strong impetus and providing a strong guarantee for comprehensive advancement in building a beautiful China and the acceleration of a modernization in which humanity and nature live together in harmony.

Chapter IV

The Chinese Wisdom of Build a Clean and Beautiful World

Building a green home is a shared dream of mankind; maintaining a good ecological environment is an aspiration shared by all peoples. In the face of unprecedented difficulties in global environmental governance, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the initiative that the international community should pursue harmony between humanity and nature, green development and prosperity, love of nature, the spirit of sound governance, and joint response through cooperation – a call that reflects the sense of responsibility of the leader of a great nation for world affairs, provides Chinese wisdom and a Chinese solution for building a clean and beautiful world, and is inspirational and thought-provoking for the sustainable development of humankind.

In 2016, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) released a report entitled *Green Water and Green Mountains are Golden Mountains: China's Ecological Civilization Strategy and Action*; in 2021, the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was held with the theme of *Ecological Civilization: Building a Community of All Life on Earth* – the first time that the United Nations held a global conference with ecological civilization as its theme. A series of echoes and resonance bear full testimony to the contemporary value, worldwide significance, and global contribution of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization and demonstrate its unique Chinese wisdom and experience in relief.

Since entering the new era, under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization, China, keeping itself abreast of the times, holding the whole world in view, assuming its responsibility, and showing its commitment as a big country, has not only turbocharged its ecological civilization dirve, but also actively participated in global environmental governance in the common interests of mankind as a whole. It is committed to promoting the construction of a fair, reasonable, and win-win global environmental governance system and pushing forward the building of the green Belt and Road. It has stepped up South-South cooperation and cooperation with neighboring countries to provide more public goods to the world and promote the sustainable development of humankind, having achieved a major transition from a participant to a leader in global environmental governance.

As an active leader in global climate governance, China has been

implementing comprehensively the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); it took the lead in releasing China's Country Program for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and made a historic contribution to the conclusion and rapid entry into force of the Paris Agreement. Having increased its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), China announced that it would strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, a goal with which China will have made the biggest reduction in carbon emission intensity in the world and moved from carbon peaking to carbon neutrality in the shortest time in world history. It will have lowered its carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by over 65 percent from the 2005 level and increased the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 25 percent.

China's green energy development has become the engine of the global energy transition, with its installed hydropower, wind power, solar power, biomass power generation, and new energy vehicle ownership ranking first in the world for many years in a row. In addition, China announced that it would no longer build any new offshore coal power projects.

China was among the first countries to sign and ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity. As the President of CBD COP 15 and with the strong support and joint efforts of the international community, China successfully convened COP 15 in two phases, established the Kunming Biodiversity Fund and pushed for the conclusion of a package of landmark outcomes including the historic Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework which is both ambitious and pragmatic; under the Chinese Presidency, COP 15 set the 30X30 target of protecting at least 30% of the world's land and oceans by 2030, leading global biodiversity on the path to restoration.

China attaches great importance to strengthening international cooperation on biodiversity. It established the China-Africa Center for Environmental Cooperation and cooperated with Kenya in compiling the Flora of Kenya – the country's first – to fill the gaps in its botanical resources research. China has also cooperated with Russia, Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, and other countries to establish cross-border nature reserves and ecological corridors.

China has been implementing the Ramsar Convention for wetlands for over 30 years. It has established a hierarchical conservation and management system for wetland ecosystems, implemented the national wetland conservation plan and major projects for wetland conservation, and successfully hosted the 14th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 14) to the Ramsar Convention.

As one of the best practitioners of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), China successfully organized the thirteenth

session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 13) to UNCCD, the global commemoration of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, and other major events.

China firmly practices the concept of a maritime community with a shared future and is engaged in mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation with the international community through multiple channels, in various forms, and at deeper levels. It has actively promoted the implementation of international treaties related to seas and oceans, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It has acceded to the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, the Antarctic Treaty, and more than 30 other sea-related multilateral treaties.

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized “making further contributions to building a clean and beautiful world”.^① China will work together with other countries with unprecedented ambition and action, take on the responsibilities courageously, make concerted efforts with one mind, uphold the principles of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, green development, systems governance, people-centeredness, multilateralism, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in order to build a community of life between humanity and nature and build a better homeland on earth.

^① Xi Jinping, *Note on the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and Promoting Chinese-Style Modernization*, Xinhua News Agency, July 21, 2024, by permission.