

**China and Ecological Civilization**  
**(Presented at ICEC Side Event at the UN, May 7, 2010)**  
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My comments will primarily concern the current discourse on ecological civilization in China. I first became aware of this discourse when I received an invitation in January 2009 to participate in a Symposium on Ecological Civilization in Sanya, China. I immediately liked the term because I thought it was large enough to cover the massive transformation that is needed in human society. I also thought it correctly indicated that change would need to take place at the highest orders of human society to meet the crises we face in both human development and the relations of humans and nature.

The term ecological civilization was new to me, but I later learned that scientists in the former Soviet Union called for an ecological civilization in 1984. The idea was taken up in China by Ye Qianji in 1987 and later by Pan Yue of China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). The idea came into prominence when it was included as a key element in Hu Jintao's report<sup>1</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Community Party in November 2007.

When I received the invitation to the conference in January 2009, I could hardly believe what I was reading. It seemed as though the Chinese had jumped ahead in conceiving of the changes that are needed in human society.

My invitation stated:

The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century suffers from many increasingly serious global social problems: population explosion, resource shortage and depletion, environmental degradation, and polarizing of rich and poor. These problems, together with the recent financial crisis, pose unprecedented threats to the future of the human race. Many scientists and scholars have come to a consensus that ecological civilization is the only correct choice for continuing human survival and development. But opinions differ on questions such as what ecological civilization is and how ecological civilization can come into being. Now, thoughtful theoretical studies on ecological civilization are urgently needed, so that feasible measures can be put forth and a consensus in the international community can be reached to promote the achievement of this goal.

With this as context they called for a conference to consider, among other things,

1. Ecological civilization as a new stage of human civilization after agricultural civilization and industrial civilization;
2. The relation between ecological and environmental problems and the market economy and globalization;

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Hu is the General Secretary of the Chinese Community Party. He gave the report of the Central Committee of the Chinese Party to the Congress.

3. Preconditions thoughts and measures to achieve ecological civilization;
4. Ecological civilization and sustainable development of society;
5. Ecological civilization and human equality, freedom, welfare and all-around development; and
6. Experiences of ecological civilization.

I attended the conference and it was quite good.

In March of this year, I received another invitation, this time to the First International Conference on Chinese Traditional Culture and Ecological Civilization, which will be held in Beijing in October 2010 and be sponsored by SEPA, the Chinese Association for Science and Technology, the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences, and the International Conference of Yi-Ching Studies. This invitation stated

Ecological civilization is a more advanced stage of the development of human civilization ... toward which the whole of humanity is striding in pursuit of harmonious and coordinated development of humanity and nature after reflecting on the malpractices of production, lifestyle and values in the process of industrialization for 300-plus years.

Chinese traditional culture, containing incisive thoughts of ecological harmony, such as “human-being is an integral part of nature” and “the way of nature is the way of human-being”, reflects the ecological wisdom coinciding with many principles advocated as being in modern ecological civilization. These principles successfully guided China’s practices in the coordinated development of traditional agricultural and natural ecology for thousands of years. At present, with the serious challenge of global environmental pollution and ecological crises, it is quite valuable in theory and very important in practice to discuss how to inherit and carry forward the fine elements of our traditional culture to be a rich source of ideas for the construction of socialist ecological civilization.

On Monday and Tuesday of this week I participated in yet another conference on ecological civilization held in Claremont, California. More than 60 scholars came from China for this conference. It was sponsored by the Institute for the Postmodern Development of China and co-sponsored by the Central Bureau for Compilation and Translation, the main publishing bureau of the Chinese government. This was the agency that translated Marx into Chinese in an earlier period to guide the Chinese people and now it is working on ecological civilization.

Here is just a random sample of the thinking of the Chinese scholars. Shusong Wang of Qiqihar University wrote:

Advanced science and technology created by humans has conversely ruled humankind and subverted original cultural patterns. This requires us to proceed from the cultural perspective to undertake thorough-going philosophical thinking in the fields of ecological essence, existence, history, values and ecological culture. Culture is the production, accumulation and development of practices by humans, and nature is also a source of human culture. In a sense, cultural history can be said to be one in which human beings

change nature, and every cultural creation, either directly or indirectly, reflects the relationship of humans and nature.

I was astounded by the quality of thought presented and I doubt that it could be reproduced in the American academy because the Chinese somehow enter deeply into the relationship of humans, human culture and nature and the organic and dynamic relations involved. Further they had given themselves to the premise that industrial civilization must now give way to ecological civilization.

Does this mean that the Chinese have arrived at ecological civilization? A Communist Party official at the conference arguing with one young Chinese scholar insisted that this was indeed the case.

I returned home to read this week to read these stories about China. One was of the Shanghai World Expo just opened on May 1. Shanghai has spent \$4.2 billion preparing for this event, more than twice what was spent for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Billed as an expo to stimulate discussion of “urban maladies,” *The Economist* quotes a senior organizer as saying visitors are supposed to experience “the sensation of being in a fantastic movie of light and sound, of entering a theme park full of colour and attractions.”

Huanent Power, China’s biggest utility announced that it increased its production of electricity in China by 40% in the first quarter of this year. *The Economist* states that power added in China in this year alone will approach the entire installed capacity of electric power generation in Germany or France.

Yesterday *The New York Times* reported, “Even as China has set ambitious goals for itself in clean-energy production and reduction of global warming gases, the country’s surging demand for power from oil and coal has led to the largest six-month increase in the tonnage of human generated greenhouse gases ever by a single country.

So China . . . ecological civilization or not?

China may not yet be ecological civilization, but it has taken the lead in this discourse.

The event this evening was organized by the newly formed Interfaith Coalition on Ecological Civilization. Its purpose is “To facilitate a dialogue among the various sectors of society on ecological civilization, and gather faith responses from this dialogue in forms that will inspire and assist the individual and cultural transformation that is the necessary foundation of an ecological civilization.”

May this conversation grow.