

China turns to ecology in search of 'civilisation'

BY [James Oswald](#)



From obscure origins, China's ecological civilisation model has grown into an international movement

In 2007, then Premier Hu Jintao announced that China would become an 'ecological civilisation', eschewing the previous development model that had seen economic growth take priority over environmental health.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a history of using the concept of civilisation, or *wenming*, as part of its moralistic methods of governance: material civilisation, spiritual civilisation, and political civilisation have all been invoked.

In the Deng era, material civilisation set an ideal material standard of living and spiritual civilisation guided the moral decisions of these Chinese nouveau riche. Later, Jiang Zemin [introduced political civilisation](#) that focused on regulation, law, governance and institution-building. This Chinese notion of civilisation is best understood as a process, of 'becoming civilised,' rather than the Western conception of civilisation that has its roots in the notion of the city.

Though these civilising discourses are a response to real or perceived problems arising from China's development and incorporation into the global market economy, they differ from ecological civilisation in an important way. The previous civilisations are inward-looking attempts by the CCP to address issues arising from its development and modernisation. Ecological civilisation, in contrast, has international implications— after all, the present environmental crisis, while it may see a particularly severe expression in mainland China, is international in nature and its causes and manifestations are global.



Formal acceptance

This event marks the CCP's [formal acceptance of the concept](#), as the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences has strong connections to the party's Central Propaganda Department. Liu also established the Ecological Civilisation Club, an institute dedicated to researching ecological civilisation, and its work has been

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school, of ecological civilisation. Through this club he has published many related works on ecological civilisation and has also run classes for officials on the topic.

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Two years before Liu's first book on the topic of ecological civilisation was published in 1997, American academic [Roy Morrison](#) also started writing about ecological civilisation in his work *Ecological Democracy*. Morrison's role as the first academic to write about ecological civilisation in a book came to be

[acknowledged by the Chinese government](#)

Others, such as John B. Cobb Jr, based at the Centre for Process Studies at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California, along with some of his colleagues, such as Philip Clayton and Wang Zhihe, have been conducting research, giving seminars and opening centres in China dedicated to promoting ecological civilisation. Grounded in 'process thought' inspired by the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, they have developed

[a theoretical framework](#)

called 'organic Marxism' that challenges us to adopt social changes in order to facilitate the transition to an ecological post-industrial society—ecological civilisation.

According to Morrison, the concept of ecological civilisation refers to the reorganisation of society along ecological lines—a society where humanity has learned to coexist with nature, capitalist and industrial modes of production are avoided, technology complements nature and promotes sustainability, and measures are adopted to strengthen a sense of community. The

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Moral imperative

However, under the formulation of organic Marxism, and in the writings of Liu, there is a greater emphasis on the idea of becoming 'ecologically civilised,' that is, that environmental problems are at their core a problem of values and that there is a moral imperative for people to become imbued with ecological values. Such moralistic governance has a long tradition in China, and hence framing the environmental crisis as a moral problem does not stray far from usual governmental practices. Globally, however, framing environmental issues as a moral problem is a unique approach to addressing the environmental crisis, and as such is also worthy of our attention.

In China, the concept of ecological civilisation has been adopted in many ways. It is seen on the streets as a slogan in 'big letter posters,' it is the 'guiding thought' for new environmental policy documents, it has been incorporated into the constitution, it is used to describe campaigns for environmental remediation and it is adopted by grassroots movements as the catchcry for their attempts at solving China's environmental woes.

Its use outside China is nascent, but it is rapidly growing in popularity, being spread by academics from within and outside the country. Ecological civilisation has grown from obscure origins into an international movement, and the expression is gaining popularity with each passing day. Its significance as a catchcry for environmental remediation and as a guiding thought for reorganising society along ecological lines certainly warrants our close attention.

Featured image:

Cartoon by Gu Peili, a graphical representation of the concept of a 'two-oriented society'. *Photo*
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