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The discourses of green modernization and eco-civilizational progress in contemporary China: convergence, tension and mutual learning

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“Chinese modernization”, articulated systematically by the working report to the 20th National Congress of Communist Party of China(CPC) in 2022, has been gradually become a worldwide-known popular concept, which emphasizes harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature as one of its “five unique features”. A significant change arisen from it is that, two green theoretical discourses of “eco-civilizational progress” and “green modernization” in contemporary China have historically converged. In the Chinese context, the two discourses can be to a large extent understood as characteristic forms of a more general green discourse. Both the goals or the objectives to be transformed and the dependent environment are common or shared. As self-contained discursive theories, though, there are also noticeable differences and even a certain degree of tension between them. An ideal situation would be that, on the one hand, both of them are consciously put under a broader framework of green discourse theory, from which they can mutually learn and promote from each other, and on the other hand, it is expected that that can better serve China’s practice of building a modern socialist country in all respects.

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Over the past decade, under the overall leadership of Communist Party of China (CPC), China's environmental protection has made remarkable progress, achieving "some historic, turning and overall changes" (Xi 2022a). By 2022, the average concentration of PM_{2.5} in China's major cities has dropped 57% cumulatively to 29 μ g/m³, and the heavily-polluted day numbers has been reduced by 93%; the proportion of good surface water bodies nationwide has reached 87.9%, and the black and bad-smelling bodies of water in the cities of prefecture level and above has been apparently eliminated; the forest coverage rate nationwide has increased to 24.02%, making it the country with the fastest growth of forest resources and the largest area of artificial forestation in the world; the first five national parks have been established accordingly, and more than 50 integrated protection and restoration projects for mountains, rivers, forests, lakes, grasslands and sand have been comprehensively carried out (Xinhua News Agency 2023). As a result, both environmental protection and governance and economic and social modernization development in China have been entering into a new stage, and meanwhile facing with certain opportunities and challenges.

As a response to the new and changing situation, working report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC in 2022 systematically articulated the political concept and policy implications of "Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature", which is a key building element of "Chinese modernization theory". In this way, it not only establishes this concept or discourse largely as an independent green discursive theory, but also highlights the question of its relationship with another well-known green discourse, "eco-civilizational progress". This offers a new view to explore the up-to-date evolution of green discourse in contemporary China. This article will begin with an overall review of the development process of these two discursive theories, and then briefly analyze the converging trends they have displayed and the inherent tension and the potential of mutual learning and promotion embedded within them.

Undoubtedly, in the Chinese context, the theoretical discourse or discursive theory such as "Chinese modernization" and "eco-civilizational progress" can be to a large extent an official or political discourse, which is first proposed and strongly promoted by the CPC and governments. Following this logic, the main purpose of this article is to clarify the political and policy implications of these two discourses—above all as an official or governing party discourse, and new opportunities and challenges of the convergence of them may bring about for a more general green transformation in China, from a critical perspective of environmental social sciences.

Development of the discursive theory of "eco-civilizational progress"

In spite of its earlier and comparably widespread application in various countries, the discourse of "eco-civilizational progress" or "building an ecological civilization" is primarily a "Chinese phenomenon" (Foster 2023; Lu and Wang 2022:179–205). Since the early 1980s, "eco-civilizational progress", or other similar forms of expression, first became a frequently used term or phrase among the Chinese academia. Then it gradually expanded into the political and policy discourse system of the CPC, which was adopted as a significant component of its political ideology and governance strategy at the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012. After approximately half a century of evolution and expansion, it has developed into a complicated discursive theory system which can be broadly summarized into three typical concrete forms or analytical dimensions: "eco-civilizational progress" discourse and

policy, "socialist eco-civilization" theory and practice and "Xi Jinping Thought on Eco-civilization", which is regarded as a crucial part of the CPC's theoretical innovation in the New Era. For the convenience of analysis in the following, we will focus on the formation and development of Xi Jinping Thought on Eco-civilization (hereafter referred to as "New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress").

First, in terms of the origin of the theory, three sources can be observed to constitute the primary theoretical references or scholarly support for New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress: 1) Marxist ecological(civilization) theory and its worldview and methodology, 2) the research achievements in environmental humanities and social sciences, and 3) China's precious traditional ecological culture (Huan 2019b, 2022a, 2023a). Regarding the first source, it should be addressed that, Marxist ecological(civilization) theory has extended far beyond the Marxist environmental philosophy, especially its classical views on dialectical relationships between humanity and nature. Instead, its extensive elaboration on ecological political economy and the green future society of scientific socialism are still very enlightening from today's relevant viewpoints (Burkett 1999/2015 and 2006; Foster 2000; O'Connor 1998). Moreover, literatures on Marxist ecological(civilization) theory are not limited to classic writers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; it should also include a large number of eco-Marxists in a broad sense, especially from Europe and the United States, as well as Marxist ecologists of contemporary China (Fang 2017; Xie 2019). Precisely because of its rich contents, Marxist ecological(civilization) theory constitutes arguably a systemic and universal political philosophy and serves as the foundation of ecological worldview and methodology for New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress.

As for the second source, if environmental humanities and social sciences can be considered as the counterpart to another two branches of "ecological environmental discipline" in a broader sense, i.e. "environmental natural sciences" and "environmental engineering technology", then it would be obvious that, environmental humanities and social sciences can provide both theoretical materials for constructing any green discourse system and its disciplinary orientation so as to engage in dialogue with other scientific disciplines. In this sense, formation and development of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress is not only benefited from existing research achievements of environmental humanities and social sciences in China and abroad since the 1960s, but also an integral part of the rapidly expanding green disciplinary(theoretical) domains.

For the third source, it is clear that, valuable traditional Chinese ecological culture has been offering rich nourishment to develop and foster New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress, which inherits from and carries with various theoretical viewpoints and overall thinking modes across different schools of thought. For instance, Xi Jinping emphasizes that, "The Chinese people have always valued the idea that, human beings are an integral part of nature and should follow the laws of nature, pursuing harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature" (Xi 2022b:277) and "The Chinese nation has always pursued the harmonious development of humans and nature, accumulating rich ecological civilization ideas"(Xi 2022b:273). It should be further clarified that, only through creative transformation and innovative development, as which has also been verified by organic Marxists or philosophers of constructive postmodernism (Clayton and Heinzekehr 2014), can precious traditional ecological culture genuinely contribute to the development of Chinese modern civilization which exactly aims to ultimately build a socialist modern country where humans and nature harmoniously can coexist.

Second, the on-going theoretical construction and innovation of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress as a green discourse system can be generalized as a dual process of historical generation of the ecological dimension of Socialist Theory with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era led by the CPC and formation process of an innovative theoretical system primarily created by Xi Jinping (CPC 2021:23–26; Huan 2022b, 2022c). What can be clearly observed from here from the former development track is the ever-increasing political importance and place on the agenda of ecological environmental issues in the CPC's theoretical cognition and governance practice. This gradual evolution has resulted in the successive core propositions or political ideologies related to ecological environmental protection or eco-civilizational progress in a broad sense, such as Mao Zedong's viewpoint of "improving the environment and being thrifty", Deng Xiaoping's viewpoint of "taking environmental protection as a basic state policy", Jiang Zemin's viewpoint of "implementing the sustainable development strategy", and Hu Jintao's viewpoint of "building a resource-saving and environmentally friendly society". All these elaborations, while constituting the CPC's guiding principles relating to ecological environmental protection and governance or eco-civilizational progress in a broader sense in various periods, arguably serve as a historical preparation or transition towards New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress.

As for the second development pathway, New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress has gone through a long-term process of change, gradually evolving from an initial local governance-centered proposition to a comprehensive and systemic theoretical system which has been playing a crucial leading role for the practice of building a socialist eco-civilization in China. Specifically, this process can be roughly separated into three stages.

1. The Stage of Gestation and Sprout (1982–2007). In the course of 25 years of local governance, Xi Jinping's proposition on ecological civilization has undergone a process from germination to maturity. The landmark achievement from it is a systematized theory of environmental protection governance and green development, which focuses on "the two mountains theory (*liang shan lun*)"—"Clear waters and verdant mountains are invaluable assets" (Xi 2007:153).
2. The Stage of Formation and Establishment (2007–2018). Following the leadership of the state in Beijing, Xi Jinping started to think and deal with the issues of ecological environmental protection and eco-civilizational progress on the national level. As a result, New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress has been systematically theorized step-by-step and then officially established, marked by the remarkable documents such as the 18th and the 19th CPC National Congress reports and his speech on 18 May 2018 at the national conference on ecological environmental protection.
3. The Stage of Enrichment and Development (2018–2024). Over the past years, Xi Jinping has further made lots of writings, speeches and talks regarding the principles and their implementation of eco-civilizational progress. The major documents in this period include two addresses at the Wuhan symposium in 2018 on Yangtze River Economic Belt development and at the Zhengzhou symposium in 2019 on ecological protection and high-quality development in the Yellow River Basin, Volumes 3 and 4 of *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* published in 2020 and 2022, *On Upholding Harmonious Coexistence between Humanity and Nature* published in 2022, the 20th CPC

National Congress report in 2022, Volumes 1 and 2 of *Selected Works of Xi Jinping* published in 2023, and his speech on 17 July 2023 at the national conference on ecological environmental protection.

Third, in terms of the theoretical system implications, New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress can be broadly categorized into three main "system forms", which are: the policy discourse system, the academic discourse system, and the worldview and methodology discourse system (Huan 2023b).

The primary document laying the foundation for "the policy discourse system" is Xi Jinping's speech on 18 May 2018 at the National Conference on Ecological Environmental Protection (generally referred to as "the 5.18 Speech"). Above all, the second part of this speech has clearly elaborated on "the six key principles" that must be adhered to for strengthening eco-civilizational progress. They are "Upholding harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature" "Clear waters and verdant mountains are invaluable assets" "Sound ecological environment is the most inclusive well-being of the people" "Mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes and grasslands are a life community" "Protecting the environment requires the best institutional arrangements and the strictest rule of law" "Working together on global eco-civilizational progress" (Xi 2022b:8–14). These principles had been later expanded into "the eight key principles" (adding "A sound ecosystem is essential for the prosperity of human civilization" and "Turning the target of building a beautiful China into conscious action for all people") and further "the ten key principles" (adding "Ensuring the overall leadership of the Party in eco-civilizational progress" and "Green development is a profound revolution in the outlook on development") (Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and Ministry of Ecology and Environment 2022). Thus, it has evolved into a more integrated and formalized policy discourse system.

In addition, based on the explicit statements in the 20th CPC National Congress report, it can be argued that the related propositions in the parts of "the ten theoretical credos", "the fourteen basic strategies" and "the achievements in thirteen policy areas", adopted respectively by the 19th CPC National Congress and the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, also constitute a complete system of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress as a policy discourse. This actually does not mean, though, putting these credos, strategies and achievements together itself can provide a clear discursive or logical framework for them. In other words, further theoretical generalization and induction are still necessary.

The "academic discourse system" of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress is largely interpreted and constructed by scholars in the research field of environmental humanities and social sciences (Huan 2022d; Zhang and Li 2022; Zhang 2019), considering it as a normal discipline of green change theory or culture. From a perspective of political philosophy, this theoretical discourse can be considered as a systemic answer to the series of question, i.e., "why pursuing eco-civilizational progress, what kind of it to be built and how to facilitate it" (Huan 2023d; Xi 2022b: 9). In this regard, the 18th CPC National Congress report, the 19th CPC National Congress report and "the 5.18 Speech" are arguably the most typical three "system patterns" of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress. In sum, all these documents articulated the significant importance of eco-civilizational progress in contemporary China, and its main political and policy implications, visions of future society, major strategic deployments and general task requirements. In our viewpoint, based on the documents mentioned above, we can further summarize and refine the following ten core

concepts(categories) and eight basic theoretical propositions (Huan 2021a).

The ten core concepts or phrases can be listed as follows: “socialist eco-civilizational progress” “sustainable development of the Chinese nation-beautiful China-clean and beautiful world” “humanity and nature as a community of life-mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands and sand as a community of life-community with a shared future for mankind” “respecting nature, conforming to nature and protecting nature” “saving resources and protecting the environment as a basic state policy-implementing the strategy of sustainable development-building a resources-saving and environmentally friendly society-principles of prioritizing resource conservation and environmental protection and letting nature restore itself” “eco-civilizational economy(spatial pattern, industrial structure, mode of production and lifestyles constructed in stages with the features of resources conservation and environmental protection)” “modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” “green development” “eco-civilizational societal institutions” “global eco-civilizational progress”.

In detail, the eight basic theoretical propositions or arguments include: “A human civilization may thrive if its natural surroundings thrive, and will suffer if its natural surroundings suffer” “Clear waters and verdant mountains are invaluable assets” “Protecting the environment is to protect productivity, and improving the environment is to boost productivity” “A sound ecological environment is the most inclusive well-being of the people” “Ecological environment protection and governance must be carried out in a systemic or integrated manner, across all regions and throughout the entire process” “Protecting ecological environment depends on complete institutions and the rule of law” “Pushing the strategy of building a beautiful China into conscious action for all people” “China is an important participant, contributor and trailblazer in global eco-civilizational progress”.

It should be pointed out that, for proper wording of these key concepts and basic propositions, what is equally important are respecting the rhetoric terms used in the original policy documents and making them suitable for academic communication, and for international academic dialogue in particular. In this sense, there are undoubtedly a lot of work to do in conceptualizing and theorizing the CPC’s policy documents and writings by Xi Jinping himself. For instance, for the statements like “Protecting ecological environment depends on complete institutions and the rule of law” or “Only by implementing the strictest institutions and the tightest rule of law can reliable guarantee for eco-civilizational progress be provided”, their political and policy connotations are undoubtedly quite clear. Yet, it still seems that treating them as a concept such as “eco-civilizational rule of law” rather than a proposition can possibly be a more appropriate way.¹

The efforts regarding New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress as a worldview and methodology discourse system are still quite new, which are stimulated by the major message released from the 20th CPC National Congress report. This report first calls for “grasping the worldview and methodology of the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, and adhering to and using well its positions, viewpoints and methods” (Xi 2022a:18–19). It is true that theoretical interpretation and construction from the viewpoint of worldview and methodology is especially relevant to the discourse of eco-civilizational progress. For the issue of promoting eco-civilizational progress, the 20th CPC National Congress report did not reiterate the key principles and basic propositions of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress. Instead, it emphasizes

the way to apply this innovative theory of the CPC to the practice of building a modern socialist country in all respects. Accordingly, it has elaborated on and demonstrated the worldview and methodology implications of this thought, so as to meet various challenges in the process of building a Chinese modernization characterized by harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Notably, the chapter 10 of the 20th CPC National Congress report is both a detailed interpretation and demonstrated example of New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress as a worldview and methodology system. On the one hand, it clearly indicates that, the key point of mastering and using well the worldview and methodology of this thought is “to plan development standing on the height of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” (Xi 2022a:50). On the other hand, it has analyzed with emphasis the four-dimensional relations and the four key strategies which must be dealt with or implemented systemically and dialectically in the practice of building a beautiful China. The four-dimensional relations are as follows: “integrated protection and governance of natural ecosystems” “coordination and consistency of ecological environmental protection and governance” “coordinated promotion of ecological environmental protection and economic development” “integral promotion of prioritizing ecological conservation and green development”(Xi 2022a:50). Clearly, the main thread operating through them is a systemic way of thinking, which emphasizes the significance and conscious application of system method in ecological environment protection and governance. In other words, ecological environment protection and governance must be carried out in a systemic or integrated manner, across all regions and throughout the entire process. And the same is true with the exposition of key strategies or areas policy. All the terms like “accelerating” “deepening” “enhancing” and “actively yet prudently advancing” have displayed strong methodological implications.

To sum up, especially since entering the New Era in 2012, China’s eco-civilizational progress has made remarkable achievements (Clayton 2024; *People’s Daily* 17 July 2023). Among them, New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress has been evolving into theoretical generalization and practical guidance for the socialist eco-civilizational progress of contemporary China (Huan 2023e and 2015). While displayed as a complete policy discourse system, an academic discourse system and to some extent a worldview and methodology discourse system, though, this green discursive theory is continually experiencing a process of enrichment and development. For instance, the implementation of the “carbon peaking and carbon neutrality” strategy in the years to come will possibly bring about more and stronger stimulations for the development of eco-civilizational progress discourse as one of the CPC’s innovative theories.

Development of the discursive theory of “green modernization”

The concept of green or ecological modernization in a broad sense—referring to a resource-saving and environmentally friendly industrialization—can be traced back much further in China, as part of the modernization goals and governance strategies of the CPC (Wu 2023; Huan 2019a). However, combination of the terms like “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” “Chinese(-style)” and “modernization” began to emerge in the middle and later periods of the first forty years of reform and opening up. Because, this new cognitive attitude is closely tied to a reflective position and understanding of the CPC and governments regarding both modernization practices and the discourse of modernization itself. In other words, “green modernization” that the authors here refer to is used in a stricter or

narrower sense, i.e., “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”—its connotation is significantly different from the concepts like “eco-modernization” in the context of EU and the United States (Mol 1995; Murphy 2001; Weale 1992) though it has actually gone through a gradual process of conceptualization and theorization.

Deng Xiaoping, major leader of the CPC’s Second Generation, first mentioned three times of the terms of “Chinese-style modernization path” and “Chinese-style four modernizations” in 1979. “Now development should also adapt to China’s conditions and embark on a Chinese-style modernization path” (Deng 1994:163) “We made a big boast to achieve four modernizations by the end of this century. Then we changed our terminology and called it Chinese-style modernization, which means lowering the standards a bit” (Deng 1994:194) “The four modernizations we want to realize are Chinese-style four modernizations. Our concept of the four modernizations is not the concept of modernization like yours, rather the concept of ‘a well-off family’” (Deng 1994:237). Obviously, what Deng Xiaoping emphasized is to achieve development suitable for China’s reality and to pursue a path of modernization tailored to China. The focus of these initial expressions was the relatively lower economic development goals compared to the Western countries, particularly in terms of gross national product(GDP) per capita, with the aim of building “a moderately prosperous society(country)”. Moreover, when talking about China’s natural resources and ecological basis—though he did mention the problem or significant feature of “large population and little arable land”, what he highlighted is “abundant natural resources” as an endowment or advantage for China’s modernization development (Deng 1994:164;111).

At the turn of the century, in his speech at the conference celebrating the 80th anniversary of the founding of the CPC in 2001 and in working report to the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002, Chairman Jiang Zemin pointed out that, “It is necessary to promote coordination and harmony between humanity and nature, enabling people to work and live in a beautiful ecological environment.....striving to pioneer a road of civilization development that is characterized by prosperous production, living in abundance and ecologically sound” (Jiang 2006:295) and “Promoting the industrialization driven by informatization and promoting the informatization facilitated by industrialization, so as to find a road of new-type industrialization that is characterized by high scientific and technological content, good economic returns, low resources consumption, less environmental pollution and a full play of the advantage of human resources” (Jiang 2006:544–545). It can be found that, the CPC under the leadership of Jiang Zemin has already linked the goal of harmony(coordination) between humanity and nature with the road of civilization development and new-type industrialization, and elevated it as an overall goal and requirement for implementing the basic state policy of protecting the environment and the sustainable development strategy at the national level.

At the beginning of 21st century, Chairman Hu Jintao, at the second meeting of the Third Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee in 2003 and at the central committee work symposium on population, resources and environment in 2004, pointed out that, “To fully realize this goal—building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.....we must strive to achieve ‘living in harmony between humanity and nature’ in the process of developing and utilizing natural resources, and to realize sustainable economic and social development” (Hu 2016a:104) “Sustainable development means to promote the harmony between humanity and nature, to realize the coordination between economic development and population, resources and the environment, and to adhere to the road of civilization development of prosperous production, living in abundance and

ecologically sound, so as to ensure sustainable development from one generation to the next” (Hu 2016a:167).

Then, in his speeches at the seminar on studying and implementing the themes of the 17th CPC National Congress in 2007 and at the national summary and commendation conference on earthquake relief in 2008, Hu Jintao further pointed out that, “According to the classic Marxist thinkers, ideal society of the future is one in which the productive forces of society are highly developed and the spiritual life of people is extremely colorful, and in which people live in harmony with each other and with nature” (Hu 2016b:5) “Continuously understanding nature in the practice of transforming the objective and subjective worlds, rationally utilizing nature on the basis of conforming to the laws of nature, and developing ourself in our living in harmony with nature are the eternal themes of human survival and progress” (Hu 2016b:134).

Finally, Hu Jintao, at the provincial ministerial-level leading cadres’ special seminar in 2012, pointed out that, “Strengthening eco-civilizational progress is an important achievement of our re-understanding of the laws of nature and the relationship between humanity and nature. Promoting the formation of a new pattern of modernization for the harmonious development of humanity and nature is a fundamental requirement for maintaining stable and rapid economic development, improving people’s quality of life and promoting social harmony and stability” (Hu 2016b: 609).

Clearly, the new generation of the CPC, under the leadership of Hu Jintao, has already placed the promotion of harmonious development(coexistence) between humanity and nature as the goal or mission in implementing the national strategies of sustainable development and eco-civilizational progress, and explicitly used the elaborations such as “living in harmony between humanity and nature” “the new pattern of modernization development in harmony with nature”. In other words, the issue of harmony between humanity and nature can also be an issue of rationally utilizing nature and developing human beings themselves on the basis of compliance with the laws of nature, an issue of sustainable economic and social development, especially an issue of coordinating economic development with population, resources and the environment, is also an issue of promoting the formation of a new pattern of modernization in which human beings and nature are in a harmonious relation. Focusing on this point, the concept of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” has already been on the horizon (Table 1).

Since becoming the leader of the Party and state, Xi Jinping has elaborated the concept of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” for several times.² “Green development, in its essence, is to solve the problem of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.....-People are born of nature, humans and nature are a symbiotic relationship, the harm to nature will ultimately hurt human beings themselves” (Xi 2022b:133) “The modernization that we pursue is one characterized by harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. In addition to creating more material and cultural wealth to meet people’s ever-increasing needs for a better life, we need also to provide more high-quality ecological goods to meet people’s ever-growing demands for a beautiful environment. We should act on the principles of prioritizing resource conservation and environmental protection and letting nature restore itself, and develop spatial layouts, industrial structures, mode of production and lifestyle that help conserve resources and protect the environment. With this, we can restore the serenity, harmony and beauty of nature” (Xi 2022b:187).

The concept of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” was proposed with the

Table 1 Comparison of the two major green discourses.

	Eco-civilizational progress	Green modernization
Similarities	Core Ideas Vision of the Future Society Strategic Thinking	The ecological philosophical worldview of “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” A clean, beautiful and sustainable China and world. “Facilitating harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”
Differences	Theoretical Focus Objects of Criticism and Change Fundamental orientation	Green modernization of the contemporary China’s economy and society Realistic alternative to the EU and American version of eco-modernization which are still dominant in reality Promoting a green and autonomous path of modernization that is in line with the overall layout of socialism with Chinese characteristics

public announcement of “Chinese modernization theory” at the 20th CPC National Congress. According to the working report, “Chinese modernization theory” basically consists of two major parts: theoretical understandings and practical requirements. The new theoretical understandings concern how to define its “central missions” “unique characteristics” and “essential requirements” of Chinese modernization, while the practical requirements include detailed goals and tasks in the three subdivision stages: “the next five years” “by 2035” and “by the middle of this century”. And for both of them, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” is an indispensable element. On the theoretical level, “beauty” is one of the five central missions, “harmony between humanity and nature” is one of the five unique features, and “facilitating the harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” is one of the nine essential requirements. On the practical level, in the next five years, urban and rural living environment will be significantly improved and building a beautiful China will gain obvious achievements; by 2035, green modes of production and lifestyle will have been widely realized, carbon emissions will reach its peak amount and then steadily declined, ecological environment will have fundamentally been improved, and the goal of a beautiful China will have been basically realized; by the middle of the century, China will become a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful.

Thus, the working report of the 20th CPC National Congress has systematically clarified the theoretical points of “Chinese modernization,” which also explicitly delineates main implications of the concept or phrase of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”. “Chinese modernization is a modernization of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.....China is committed to sustainable development, and to the principles of prioritizing resource conservation and environmental protection and letting nature restore itself. We will protect nature and the environment as we do our own lives. We will steadfastly pursue a road of civilization development characterized with prosperous production, living in abundance and ecologically sound to ensure sustainable development of the Chinese nation” (Xi 2022a:50).

As a further elaboration and extension of main contents of the working report, at the opening ceremony of the seminar on study and implementation of the spirit of the 20th CPC National Congress on 7 February 2023, Xi Jinping pointed out that, “Unique views of world, value, history, civilization, democracy and ecology implied in Chinese modernization and their application in practice are a major innovation of world’s modernization theory and practice”(People’s Daily on 2 February 2023). Admittedly, this statement by Xi Jinping highlights both the

methodological and theoretical significance of “Chinese modernization theory” as well as the concept or expression of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” (Huan 2023c).

On the methodological level, it should be made clear is that, the concept or discourse of “Chinese modernization” could have been serving as a summary of experiences and theory of China’s modernization development over the past century, particularly since the advent of the reform and opening-up era. At the same time, it reflects the vision and ideal pursuit of contemporary China, standing at a new historic starting point with aspirations to build a modern socialist country in all respects. Correspondingly, this concept or discourse not only indicates a set of experiential facts but also signifies or directs towards a blueprint for the foreseeable future. This concept is thus not only a self-dependent practical and theoretical creation in China’s ongoing modernization process, but also an awareness that consciously absorbs and integrates diverse wisdom of the people around the world in their own modernization development and sustainable transformation. Clearly, this cognitive approach and attitude are also applicable to the ecological dimension, i.e., “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”.

On the theoretical level, the concept of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”, or “the ecological view of Chinese modernization”, is actually referring to a green or ecological modernization perspective based on a reflective synthesis of historical experiences of economic and social modernization in modern China, especially since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. Meanwhile, it also shows a new view of future regarding the central mission of “beauty” outlined in the blueprint of building a modern socialist country in all respects. Additionally, it could be representing China’s theoretical cognition and pursuit in a timely manner in this rapidly changing world, emphasizing the urgent necessity of human civilization’s transition to sustainable development, or a grand transformation towards a green society. Thus, there can be at least two dimensions to comprehend and elucidate this concept or discourse: descriptive and normative. Moreover, this concept or discourse as well as “the ecological view of Chinese modernization”, as we see, is in essence “a grand ecological view” with deep and inherent connections among each other: ecological worldview, ecological view of value, ecological view of history, ecological view of civilization, and ecological view of democracy (Huan 2023c).

Therefore, over the past years, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” has evolved into an implication-rich concept and to a certain extent a systemic discursive theory system. Furthermore, it will play a

crucial role in at least three aspects in the process of Chinese modernization as well as the modernizing process of contemporary world: to provide green regulation and guide the practical explorations for China today; to enable an endogenous or internal greening of existing modernization theories and approaches in the world; and to promote the development of environmental humanities and social sciences.

Convergence, tension and mutual learning of two major green discourses

As discussed above, especially through the analysis of related contents of the 20th CPC National Congress working report, and particularly its Chapter 3 and Chapter 10, it is clear that, the two discourses of “eco-civilizational progress” and “green modernization” have reached a historic convergence. Obviously, “New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress” and “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” are respectively the most typical system forms.

Arguably, the two discourses of “New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress” and “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” are the only two concrete theoretical forms of a broader green discourse in different backgrounds and contexts (Zhang 2023; Ji 2023). If the former discourse places its emphasis on the “five-in-one” feature or overall revolutionary implications of the on-going socialist modernization development in China, then the latter discourse instead intends to highlight the ecological qualities or characteristics of contemporary economic and social modernization in China. However, the goals or the objectives they are targeting to transform and the dependent environments are essentially common or shared.

First, as far as their core ideas are concerned, “upholding harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” is the foremost of “the six key principles”, which forms the ontological foundation of the discourse system of eco-civilizational progress (Zhou and Tong 2023). It should be addressed that, only by adhering to the core philosophical value of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, can the other five principles such as “Clear waters and verdant mountains are invaluable assets” “Sound ecological environment is the most inclusive well-being of the people” “Mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes and grasslands are a life community” “Protecting the environment requires the best institutional arrangements and the strictest rule of law” “Working together on global eco-civilizational progress” be truly established in theory and effectively implemented in practice. Furthermore, the principle of “upholding harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” is closely connected with an ontological understanding to the three specific communities, i.e., “the living community of humans and nature” “the life community of mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes and grasslands” and “the community with a shared future for mankind”, while on the level of values it will naturally lead to embrace the ideas such as “reverence for nature” “respecting nature” “conforming to nature” and “protecting nature”.

In comparison, “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” has been one of the five prominent characteristics of “Chinese modernization” theory and practice, which can be further generalized as a concept with rich and deep theoretical implications, i.e., “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”, also known as “the ecological view of Chinese modernization” (Huan 2023c). Yet, it should be noted that, just as the eco-civilizational progress principle of “upholding harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” contains profound philosophical ontological implications, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” or “the ecological

view of Chinese modernization” can be reasonably understood as an instructional ecological worldview and methodology.

Second, in terms of their visions of the future society, the discourse of eco-civilizational progress explicitly depicts the dual dimensions of “sustainable development” and “beauty”, “China(the Chinese nation)” and “the world”. That is to say, it is committed to building a sustainable China and world, and at the same time a beautiful China and world (Xu 2023). In this regard, the relations of ecological environmental protection and sustainable development and of China and the world need to be properly addressed. Theoretically, the issue of ecological environmental protection can be incorporated into the complete and systematic concept or discourse of sustainable development, pursuing an ecologically, economically and socio-culturally sustainable development. But in reality, internal contradictions and even conflicts among them will still exist for a long time, if not forever. Likewise, for the second relation, what needs to be balanced is not just a matter of needs and interests of the domestic and the international(global) stakeholders, but also a question of how to form a dynamic configuration of truly “thinking globally and acting locally” in facilitating eco-civilizational progress. Admittedly, this is not just a question for China, and it cannot be solved by China itself.

In contrast, “beautiful”, one of “the five major features” of Chinese modernization (“prosperous, democratic, culturally progressive, harmonious and beautiful”), is a symbolic expression of the overall pursuit of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”. In other words, “beautiful” is the most direct presentation or feature of the ecological dimension of Chinese modernization; the quality and capacity of ecological environment protection and governance will thus be significantly upgraded or “modernized” along with economic and social modernizing process. In this sense, the visions of future society of the two discourses are common or similar in terms of the reality that they point to and the prospects they illustrate for the near future.

Third, in terms of the strategic thinking, what the discourse of eco-civilizational progress emphasizes is the “five-in-one” overall layout and the basic strategy of “facilitating harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”, placing the eco-civilizational progress at a more prominent position among political agenda of the CPC and integrating it into all aspects of and the whole process of economic, political, social and cultural development. Following this logic, it can be observed that the resolution adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee in 2021 has summarized in the following way: “Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the CPC Central Committee has been pushing forward the eco-civilizational progress with unprecedented strength” and “the CPC has made all-round efforts in the areas of ideology, law, system, organization and style of working.....to carry out a series of fundamental, pioneering and long-term work”, witnessing “ecological environmental protection in China has undergone historic, turning and overall changes” (CCCPC 2021).

In contrast, the Chinese modernization discourse clearly stressed that, “The modernization that we pursue is one characterized by harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. In addition to creating more material and cultural wealth to meet people’s ever-increasing needs for a better life, we need also to provide more high-quality ecological goods to meet people’s ever-growing demands for a beautiful environment” (Xi 2017: 50) and “The essential requirement of Chinese modernization.....is to facilitate the harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” (Xi 2022a: 23-24). Obviously, although the focus of the two discourses can be slightly differing from each other, both of them place “facilitating harmonious coexistence

between humanity and nature” at a key position of basic strategy or strategic goal.

Nevertheless, as two kinds of discursive theory, there are still visible or significant differences between “eco-civilizational progress” and “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”. Indeed, in some cases, they are somehow in a tense relationship, which deserves to draw more attention and deep consideration.

In general, focal points that the two discourses point to or contemplate are different. “Eco-civilizational progress” devotes itself to gradually create a new kind of societal civilization or facilitate the ecological transformation of economic and social modernization development. On the one hand, the ecological innovation implication of this discursive theory stems from the distinct concept of “ecological civilization”, a self-reflective cognition or introverted behavioral choice, which aims to achieve harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature or survival of human civilization through our active self-adjustment. On the other hand, the ecological innovation implication of it also comes from an ecological negation of the dominant global understanding, values and models of modernization, which strives to explore a fundamentally different new economy, society and culture (Cobb 2023). In other words, for the discourse of eco-civilizational progress, whereas it acknowledges the historical or progressive feature of this development process, its nature of criticism of reality and radical transformation can be evident.

In comparison, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” has displayed a specific focus on gradually finding and following a rational process and appropriate path for advancing the established goals of China’s economic and social modernization. This includes the steps to enhance environmental protection and governance to the maximum throughout this historical process, and facilitate harmonious coexistence(development) between humanity and nature (Lv and Han 2023). Accordingly, a cautious consideration is required in the context where modernization still retains its status as a widely respected “political correctness”. On the one hand, people may find themselves compelled to accept, in practice, those aspects more grounded in historical experiences and international comparisons regarding the cognition and strategies of modernization. This includes shaping perceptions of natural ecological laws and constructing relationships between humanity and nature based on the historical realities. On the other hand, people may consciously or unconsciously adopt or follow those green practices or experiences of modernization that are effective or widely accepted in reality, even if they may not genuinely herald the future vision. In other words, the term of “modernization” as the subject of word-formation can possibly become a constraint or hindrance for contemplating “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” in the context of the people’s inherent reverence for its hegemonic historical legacy. Similarly, the prefix of “Chinese(-style)” may not necessarily automatically turn out to be an ecological regulation(modification) in line with “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”.

In this sense, in the authors’ view, current enthusiastic attention and discussion in Chinese academia on the discourse of “Chinese modernization” as well as its ecological dimension is reasonable and meaningful, given that this specific type of green discursive theory is still in a relatively primary stage of development.³ However, it should not be completely detached from, much less abandon, the already significantly systematized discourse of eco-civilizational progress. And even more specifically, the discourse of eco-civilizational progress is undoubtedly more fundamental and forward-looking, whereas the discourse of

“Chinese modernization” should be regarded as more realistic and practical.

Our purpose of the analysis here is by no means to devalue or deny the current research surrounding “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”. Instead, it intends to show that, this inherent tension should be consciously utilized to place the current discussion under a broader framework of green discourse theory, so as to achieve the effects of mutual inspiration and promotion of these two discourses (Chen and Xiao 2023). By doing so, each discourse can continually enrich and perfect itself during the process of mutual reference and learning, and they as a whole will better serve contemporary China’s practice of building a modern socialist country in all aspects.

On the one hand, elaborations in the working report of the 20th CPC National Congress on “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” has constituted both a structurally complete “ecological view of Chinese modernization” and an alternative narration of “New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress” in the discursive context of modernization. In other words, major requirements of facilitating eco-civilizational progress and implementing “New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress” can be indicating to firmly establish and practice the philosophical idea of “Clear waters and verdant mountains are invaluable assets”. It involves planning modernization development from the perspective of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature and advancing the process of building a beautiful China, striving to achieve integrated protection and governance of natural ecosystems, coordination and overall planning of ecological environment protection, coordinated promotion of ecological environment protection and economic development, integral promotion of prioritizing ecological conservation and green development. It also involves a comprehensive implementation of “new four strategic deployments”, i.e., accelerating green transformation of development modes, strengthening environmental pollution prevention and control, enhancing the stability, diversity and sustainability of ecological systems, and actively yet prudently advancing the goals of “carbon peaking and carbon neutrality” (Xi 2022a:50–52). As such, the two discourses themselves can be an inherently unified process of reciprocal reflection and mutual promotion.

On the other hand, a more ideal environment of theoretical development for these two discourses should be that, in our opinion, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” is taken as a phased theoretical system form of “eco-civilizational progress”, and a practical or instrumental approach for the latter to eventually achieve a qualitative breakthrough or reconstruction on the basis of the former. In other words, from a long-term perspective, the discourse of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” can be more conducive to elucidating and dealing with the issue of modernizing ecological environment protection and governance system, which is a must-do task for China’s modernization in its later stages. This helps gradually establish an effective and modern ecological environment governance system that is in accordance with the state’s economic and social modernization development. In contrast, the discourse of “eco-civilizational progress” is more capable to highlight the feature of transcendence, and ecological sustainability in particular, of contemporary China’s building a modern socialist country in all respects. It serves to regulate China’s own practice while promoting the world towards a new and just green future. Therefore, it can be imagined that, over time, focal point of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” will shift from “modernization” to “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” and “Chinese(-style)” step-by-step. Correspondingly, “eco-civilizational progress”

will obtain increasingly rich revolutionary or creative implications for human civilization due to the vivid and vibrant Chinese ideas and practice of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Conclusion

Admittedly, an intriguing academic question from systemic elaboration of the 20th CPC National Congress report on “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”—a crucial component of “the Chinese modernization theory”—is that, two green discourses of “eco-civilizational progress” and “green modernization” shaped by their own contexts have achieved a historic convergence. Largely, as the main symbol of their own family, the discourse of “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” can be regarded as another theoretical system form of the discourse of “New Era thought of eco-civilizational progress”. This is evident especially if we consider their core philosophical ideas, the visions of future society and strategic propositions, which have exemplified the remarkable progress of the CPC and governments in dealing with the issue of ecological environmental protection and governance in the New Era (Huan and Huan 2022; Huan et al. 2022).

However, if we scrutinize the two green discourses and their theoretical implications in a more detailed manner, it seems that as a more radical or long-term oriented green discourse, “eco-civilizational progress” can carry richer considerations of ecological sustainability and greater potential for societal transformation if compared to “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”. In this sense, while it can be essential not to ignore the risks of imbalance or bias in illustrating their theoretical theme and dealing with their relationships, what is more promising is to anticipate a theoretical development environment of mutual learning and promotion between them. In this context, “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” may turn out to be a phased or transitional form of “eco-civilizational progress” at the time of New Era, a primary stage of Chinese socialism, and “eco-civilizational progress” will finally achieve a qualitative breakthrough or reconstruction over a long run of interaction with its counterpart. It is precisely based on this point, that we can imagine a scenario that “Chinese modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” will eventually become a negation or transcendence of the general discourse and practice of green modernization—especially when compared to its version of Western countries (Huan 2021b:1–48; Jänicke and Jacob 2012).

Finally, this article aims to promote a normative or philosophical analysis of the green modernization and eco-civilizational progress discourses, instead of an empirical description or assessment of them as policy and strategy as well as their implementation. Undoubtedly, what the two discourses advocate or claim may not exactly be equivalent to reality itself, and there is no guarantee that those ideas or propositions will be fully institutionalized or realized. Indeed, whether these grand green narratives or plans can be transformed into the action of common people—including the business sector, managers and trade unions—is a question which can only be answered by time.

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Notes

- 1 At a “High-end Forum on Xi Jinping Thought on Rule of Law (2023)” held on 10 December 2023 in Beijing, the term “rule of law for ecological civilization” was

mentioned but not considered as one of the 30 or so original or key concepts (including the speaker herself). It also suggests that interactive dialogues between the Chinese scholars in the research fields of different “topical thoughts” such as Xi Jinping economic, diplomatic and cultural thoughts are solely needed and will be very fruitful.

- 2 Xi Jinping’s earliest elaboration of “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature” was “the Six Principles of Longdou” that he put forward during his investigation in Longdou Village, Shaowu City, Fujian Province, in January 1998. The fifth principle says that, “Humans and nature should live harmoniously, and we should not hurt it”.
- 3 According to the data of “Cnki.net”, under the subject terms “Eco-civilizational progress” and “modernization with harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature”, there are respectively 869 and 538 articles from 1 December 2022 to 30 November 2023. For the former, it is a slight decrease (986) compared with the previous year, while for the latter a substantial increase (104).

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Author contributions

The first author has done the materials collecting and main writing work and the second author(correspondence author) is in charge of the core idea and framework design.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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