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Towards a global Ecological Civilization? PRC's Official International Media Discourse on its role in Global Environmental Governance

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MASTER THESIS

Towards a Global Ecological Civilization?

PRC's Official International Media Discourse on its Role in Global
Environmental Governance

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List of abbreviations

CBDR	Common but Differentiated Responsibilities
CCP	Chinese Communist Party (<i>Zhongguo Gongchandang</i> 中國共產黨)
COP	Conference of the Parties
FYP	Five-Year Plan
GEG	Global Environmental Governance
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
PRC	People's Republic of China (<i>Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo</i> 中华人民共和国)

1. Introduction

Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavor for ecological civilization.

– Xi Jinping (2017) at the 19th CCP National Congress, October 18, 2017

As our environment deteriorates at an incredible pace, concerns about climate change and the dangers to all life on the planet continue to grow. Only a decade ago, China was publicly perceived as a key obstacle to achieving consensus on environmentalist issues in global forums by largely downplaying the negative impacts of climate change or exploiting its developing country status to reduce responsibilities (Gao 2018). Although in the environmental context, China is still largely associated with its nearly unregulated industrial revolution and the status of the world’s largest carbon emitter, as President Xi Jinping’s statement above indicates, the attitude of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) towards environmentalism and global climate cooperation has undergone a major transformation in the past decade.

Ever since Xi’s ascension in 2012, the country’s environmental advances have been striking, and the leader has significantly increased China’s¹ involvement in the Global Environmental Governance (GEG) framework. China has also made efforts on the conceptual front and developed its own answer to the internationally acclaimed concept of “sustainable development”: “ecological civilization”. China’s ecological credentials have improved to such an extent that the withdrawal of the former US President Donald Trump from the Paris Agreement in 2017 sparked serious media debates on whether China would fill the void the former leader had left behind. Xi Jinping’s September 2020 pledge, announcing that China would reach carbon neutrality before 2060, once again revived the leadership discussion. Although strained Sino–US relations and China’s initial contributions at the 26. UN Climate Change Conference (COP26)² have recently led to considerable skepticism about China’s green leadership mantle, a last-minute announcement of a US-China climate agreement at the COP26 again raised collective hope for joint leadership from China and the US (Geall 2021).

As the host of the 15. UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15)³, China did not fail to include its leading environmental concept in the theme of the 2021 international talks: *Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth*. Latest reports also

¹ When referring to China in this thesis, I always mean the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

² COP26 was held on October 31–November 12, 2021, in Glasgow.

³ After being delayed twice due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first part of the conference was held online between October 11–14, 2021, while the second part is planned for April 25–May 9, 2022.

announced the founding of a special research institute to theorize Xi's ecological thought that is believed to "provide a model for other developing countries" (China Daily 2021). With the issue of tackling climate change becoming more pressing every day, it becomes highly relevant to determine how exactly the Chinese government envisions its role in the GEG framework and understand the foundation on which it bases its environmental vision.

In the past decade, several studies made significant contributions to the English-language scholarship on the evolution of China's involvement in GEG (e.g., Li and Shapiro 2020; Geall and Ely 2014; Gao 2018) and the overarching environmental concept of "ecological civilization" (e.g., Hansen et al. 2018; Schmitt 2016; Marinelli 2018; Lord 2018). However, research on China's official environmental discourse remains limited. The authors drew either on policy documents and high-level statements (Schmitt 2016; Hansen et al. 2018; Goron 2018; Geall and Ely 2018), social surveys (Schmitt 2016), or Chinese-language media representations (Hansen et al. 2018). Despite the increasingly global orientation of Chinese environmental rhetoric and actions, the official international discourse on China's role in GEG and its connection to those emerging Chinese environmental concepts remains unexplored. Using previous research as a foundation, this thesis aims to fill this academic gap.

The motivating question of this study is: *How does the PRC government portray its role in Global Environmental Governance, and to what extent are Chinese environmental concepts incorporated into this global vision?* This main research question will be framed by the following sub-questions: *What values and assumptions does this global vision reflect and how are its key messages transmitted to foreign audiences? To what extent has this discourse been shifting over time?* By answering these research questions, I expect to provide new insights and contribute to a better understanding of the PRC's position in GEG and broader debates on different approaches towards environmentalism.

The methodological approach chosen for this study is comparative discourse analysis. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, I analyze a selection of articles published in the English-language party-led newspaper *China Daily* during two discursive timeframes (1/06/2017 – 1/09/2017; 22/09/2020 – 22/12/2020). As well as analyzing the contents of the articles, I also look at how the authors employ certain communication strategies and narratives to shape the articles' discursive realities.

The thesis is organized in the following way: The following chapter provides a historical overview of the development of China's environmental governance apparatus and the country's participation in the GEG framework. It also addresses academic debates surrounding the country's role in GEG. In Chapter 3, I review relevant literature on the origins

and the evolution of “ecological civilization”. In Chapter 4, I elaborate on the methodology and the research materials, and in Chapter 5, I introduce the findings of the discourse analysis. Chapter 6 discusses and relates my findings to previous research. Finally, I conclude and answer my research questions in the final chapter.

The findings of this study indicate that *China Daily* resorts to various discursive methods, but particularly criticism and comparison with the US, to present China as a moral, active, and responsible participant in GEG. Most of the analyzed articles deny China’s ambitions to claim leadership in GEG, even though the communication strategies used by the journalists suggest otherwise. The state’s leading environmental concept, “ecological civilization”, became a more prominent term in the discourse during the analyzed period, however, it still appears to be a mostly national objective.

2. Environmental Governance in China

Following Lemos and Agrawal’s (2008, 298) definition, “Environmental Governance” is a framework of regulatory processes, mechanisms, and organizations through which political actors determine decisions regarding national and regional environmental matters.

Decision-making on environmental matters concerning the international community occurs via binding and non-binding agreements, policies, and procedures established within “Global Environmental Governance” (GEG). The institutional framework for GEG is provided by the United Nations (UN), the most important institution for global cooperation. The Conference of the Parties (COP) serves as the supreme decision-making body regarding the overall implementation and development of GEG agreements. While international organizations and civil society are also included in GEG, states play the most fundamental role. Whether a state participates in GEG is voluntary, as there is no international body authorized to impose international obligations upon it without consent. Furthermore, the framework distinguishes between developed and developing countries regarding environmental protection capabilities and responsibilities. This guiding principle, referred to as “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities” (CBDR), was enshrined in the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change treaty (UNITAR 2017).

To research how the Chinese state⁴ envisions and presents its role in GEG, one must first consider the background against which this desire has formed. In what follows, I thus

⁴ Since Xi Jinping took office, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) supreme power has been reasserted in nearly all critical government institutions (Li and Shapiro 2020, 19). Therefore, whenever I refer to the Chinese state, I mean the Chinese state under the party’s leadership.

sketch the development of Chinese environmental governance at both the domestic and global level and address the public debates surrounding China's increasing role in GEG.

2.1. The Changing Importance of Environmental Protection (1972–2012)

Although scholars have long demonstrated that environmental destruction in China is not solely a product of modernization but rather a long-term process dating back to early imperial times (Elvin 2004), the acceleration of the degradation process in recent decades is undeniable. A substantial portion of this environmental harm was brought about by economic reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Consequently, the Chinese government positioned China as the world's factory but inevitably also as one of the most intensely contaminated places on the planet (Lord 2018, 6). With the conceptualization of global environmental cooperation at the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, China's environmental governance apparatus also began to materialize, however, environmental protection was not yet treated as a priority issue, and China did not sign the final agreement at the conference.

A significant increase in ecological commitment and rhetoric occurred only throughout the 1990s (*ibid.*, 10). The international concept of “sustainable development”⁵ became a key phrase in Chinese policymaking, and the central government acknowledged climate change for the first time, albeit as a natural phenomenon. Nevertheless, China's leaders continued to struggle with implementing environmental laws and regulations during this period (Geall and Ely 2018, 1183).

By the 2000s, the ecological consequences of China's “economic miracle” became unconcealable. Air pollution emerged as one of the most severe challenges and became the country's greatest source of social unrest. Followed by a combination of international pressure, public interest, and academic exposure of the political factors impeding China's sustainable development, the period under President Hu Jintao's and Premier Wen Jiabao's (2003–2012) leadership represented a phase of overall skepticism toward the Chinese development model and the CCP's governing capabilities (Goron 2018, 42). Due to extensive deforestation and heavy reliance on coal, this period also coincided with China's carbon emissions experiencing a significant surge, eventually leading China to become the world's biggest greenhouse gases producer in 2006 (Qi et al. 2020, 76). Threatened by a potential outburst of social upheaval,

⁵ Shah (2008, 3444) defines the concept as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

China's political leadership was pressured to address the severity of these environmental challenges.

In response, one of the major first steps taken by Hu was to release the country's first "National Climate Change Program" in 2007 (ibid., 88). However, since significant policy shifts in China need to be grounded in ideological consensus concerning the country's overarching direction, China's core ideological principles required urgent revision (Li and Shapiro 2020, 4). It is against this backdrop that Hu first introduced the concept of "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明) in 2007, which was presented as the CCP's political commitment to transform its unsustainable development model.

However, when Hu promoted the impressively sounding term at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, it yet lacked any political meaning. Moreover, the strategy and stances which Chinese negotiators adopted at the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen (COP15) secured the country an image of a "wrecker" of international climate negotiations in Western media (Gao 2018, 2013). Arguing for the primacy of international legal principles that safeguarded developing nations interests, China was perceived as leveraging its developing country status for reduced responsibilities (Li and Shapiro 2020, 4).

It was not until 2011 that both the rhetoric of ecological civilization and climate change were made an integral component of national objectives by being included in the 12th five-year plan⁶ (FYP; 2011–2015; Qi et al. 2020, 90). In 2012, Hu's final report to the 18th Party Congress entailed an entire section on the "construction of an ecological civilization". Moreover, the phrase was enshrined within the CCP's Constitution, which functioned as the most powerful rhetorical demonstration of environmental commitment thus far (Lord 2018, 10).

2.2. A New Era for China's Environmental Governance (2012–Present)

Xi Jinping's ascension in 2012 commenced a new era of domestic and global environmental governance, which coincided with China's increasingly active participation in global governance.⁷ This era was primarily characterized by unprecedented politicization of environmental protection. Xi has not only upheld the rhetorical concept of ecological

⁶ China's FYP's tend to reflect the importance allocated to various issues on the Chinese governmental agenda (Qi et al. 2020, 90).

⁷ Xi Jinping's ascension marked the end to the three-decade logic of low-profile foreign policy. The Chinese state began taking a more confident and cooperative stance in its foreign affairs. Despite the more assertive position taken by China, the leadership still officially upholds the "peaceful rise of China" narrative while rebranding it with "multilateralism, cooperation and win-win relations" (Öterbülül 2021, 3).

civilization introduced by his predecessor but also became the main producer of the term's political discourse. Consequently, ecological civilization became the key concept of China's environmental politics and one of the main pillars for the country's development (Goron 2018, 39-43).

Xi's actions also reflected the general acknowledgment of China's particular vulnerability to severe climate change effects.⁸ 2013 saw the creation of the first party organ dedicated to ecology and the first-ever release of mid- to long-term climate change strategies (ibid.). In the same year, Xi took over the direct supervision of climate change decision-making. He supervised both domestic and international policymaking, personally attending major climate change conferences, granting China a strategic opportunity to reshape global governance (Qi et al. 2020, 90f.;100).

2014 was crucial to this new path of ambitious environmental politics. Premier Li Keqiang publicly acknowledged the need to transform China's "inefficient and blind development" model and declared a "war on pollution" (Pabon 2020). Xi took a major step to position China in a more prominent role within GEG, and China was found to moderate its use of the arguments in favor of protecting developing country interests (Li and Shapiro, 4). Most importantly, in November 2014, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, Xi and President Barack Obama made a joint announcement in which they acknowledged climate change as "the greatest threat to humanity" (Qi et al. 2020, 98) and declared that each country would take ambitious measures to reduce carbon emissions.

Considering the prevalent "China threat" narrative in the US, diplomatic cooperation between the US and China was greeted with great international enthusiasm, and both countries played an instrumental role in securing the Paris Agreement⁹ at the 2015 Paris Conference (COP21). A stark change in attitudes between COP15 and COP21 has not only been suggested by researchers (Hilton and Kerr 2017; Gao 2018) but also affirmed by Chinese state officials. One day after the conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proclaimed: "Paris is not Copenhagen, and China now has a new, more proactive role to play in the world" (Qi and Wu 2015).

After President Trump took office in 2017, the US dramatically changed its policy toward China. The country declared China its "strategic rival", and the nations' bilateral

⁸ In China, the ratio between its population and the access to freshwater resources and arable land is highly disproportionate. Major climate change concerns constitute further decay of aquatic systems, rising sea levels, severe water shortages, and flooding catastrophes (Qi et al. 2020, 76).

⁹ The objective of the Paris Agreement is to limit global temperature rise far below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, above pre-industrial levels.

relations have since deteriorated greatly (Zhang 2020). Accordingly, when Trump announced the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in June 2017, the Chinese leadership was ready to assume the moral high ground. Klare (2017) wrote that it was “perhaps the greatest gift Trump has bestowed on China”. Shortly after, President Xi Jinping used the historical moment of being the first Chinese president to attend the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting in Davos to reassert China’s determination to lead on climate issues.

Under Xi’s reign, China’s environmental credentials have been significantly improved. Besides decelerated coal consumption growth, the country has become the world’s biggest producer, exporter, and investor in renewable energy and a leader in green finance (Geall and Ely 2018). The 13th FYP (2016–2020) was acclaimed as “the greenest five-year plan yet”, and the rollout of Central Environmental Inspections in 2017 caused the closure of almost 40 percent of China’s factories (Pabon 2020). In 2018, the concept of ecological civilization was ratified in the CCP’s Constitution, and a large administrative reorganization created the more elevated and centralized “Ministry of Ecology and Environment” (Goron 2018, 41).

Considering China’s impressive list of environmental achievements, Trump’s retreat from the agreement stirred up a serious debate on whether China was about to replace the US at the top of GEG. While some shared the enthusiasm, for example, Stern (2017), who wrote that China is the climate champion the world is looking for, others, such as Hilton (2017), believed that China was thrust into the leadership role “prematurely and by default” and that “it is unlikely to welcome the scrutiny that global leadership entails”. Skeptical scholars pointed towards China’s unique development status¹⁰, the potential environmental destruction of the Belt and Road Initiative – China’s large-scale infrastructure project – and to events such as the December 2019 Madrid negotiations where the Chinese leadership resisted more ambitious targets (Li and Shapiro 2020, 3). Others insisted that China neither merits the mantle of leadership nor does it truly desire it (Economy 2017).

There were also allegations that China’s political stance on climate is “purely face” and “talk” (Vanderklippe 2017). Increasing geopolitical tensions with the US¹¹, such as the ongoing trade war, the magnified conflict amid the COVID-19 pandemic, or the January 2021 presidential inauguration of Joe Biden, who immediately reinstated the US to the Paris Agreement and introduced a wide-ranging climate change program, cast further doubt upon

¹⁰ Based on the World Bank’s and the UN’s criteria, China is still considered a developing country, despite hosting the world’s second-largest economy.

¹¹ According to Zhang (2020), the Sino–US relations have now reached their lowest point since the countries’ diplomatic ties were normalized in the 1970s.

Chinese GEG leadership (Rudd 2020).

Xi's September 2020 announcement, where he pledged that China would aim to peak China's carbon emission before 2030 and reach carbon neutrality before 2060, marked an important new milestone that revived the leadership debate. Rudd (2020) wrote that this announcement was one of Xi's most important speeches on climate change which commenced a significant new era for China's climate leadership. According to him, this step signaled that climate leadership has now become China's central priority, regardless of the measures taken by other countries. Another milestone was marked by the recent China–US joint climate agreement announced at the COP26. Although the significance of this agreement is believed not to come close to the 2014 China–US climate deal, it was nevertheless interpreted as a beacon of hope amidst the ever-growing geopolitical rivalry between China and the US (Geall 2021).

3. Studying Chinese Environmental Rhetoric

In the following literature review, I summarize what is already known about the party's official rhetoric on the environment. Since the term ecological civilization is at the core of Xi's diplomatic narrative regarding environmental protection, I begin by outlining the concept's origins and development. Subsequently, I discuss the term's present meaning and the political discourse surrounding it.

3.1. The Origins of “Ecological Civilization”

While “ecological civilization” originates from earlier academic debates in China¹², the philosophical concept behind it was mainly developed during the early 2000s by Pan Yue, then deputy director of China's State Environmental Protection Administration. Pan primarily drew from Confucianist texts on the philosophical concept of the “harmony between man and nature” (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一)¹³. He also incorporated specific Buddhist and Daoist elements to conceptualize that all three philosophies essentially share a single ecocentric principle, which led him to construct the concept of “shared ecological wisdom” (*shengtai zhihui* 生态智慧) that he claims is inherent to the Chinese tradition. Moreover, he connected the idea of Chinese

¹² In the Chinese context, it was first used in 1987 by the agro-economist Ye Qianji, who pleaded for more sustainable agriculture in China (Goron 2018, 41).

¹³ *Tian* (天), contemporarily understood as heaven, held diverse connotations in ancient China. In his writings, Pan identified *tian* with nature (Hansen et al. 2018, 197).

“eco-tradition” to “eco-socialism” and insisted that China’s ecological civilization is the opposite of Western anthropocentric ethics. In his opinion, adopting the Western development model is the cause of the world’s environmental problems, and reviving the Chinese eco-tradition could offer an alternative philosophical foundation for a sustainable future (Pan 2006).

Eventually, these ideas found resonance among Chinese policymakers. The highest political leadership adopted the term at the most apt moment in the mid-2000s. Ecological civilization was also connected to another emerging rhetoric trope of “Beautiful China” (*meili zhongguo* 美丽中国), defined as “the sum of the beauty of the environment, the beauty of the times, the beauty of life, the beauty of society and the beauty of the common people” (Marinelli 2018, 379).¹⁴ Moreover, Hu Jintao’s promotion of ecological civilization collided with the introduction of the “soft power” initiative, of which the concept became part. Goron (2018, 42) wrote that selectively invoking traditional cultural values was a powerful opportunistic tool for legitimizing environmental preservation without appearing to bow to foreign pressure. However, since ecological civilization was largely aimed at local Chinese society in order to instill “feelings of national cohesion and cultural pride”, the concept failed to appeal to foreign civil society, which is the primary goal of soft power (Heurtebise 2017, 8). The fact that, at that time, the English-language translation of *shengtai wenming* was still largely inconsistent¹⁵ illustrates Heurtebise’s (2017) observation.

Although some Western scholars have viewed Pan’s “Chinese eco-tradition” positively, e.g., Scott Slovic (cited in Heurtebise 2017), most of the reviewed English-speaking scholarship was critical of this conceptualization. Scholars drew attention to the historical records of past environmental governance, which contradict the notion of a specific Chinese ecological civilization (Hansen et al. 2018; Snyder 2006), and refuted Pan’s arguments on the East vs. West dichotomy (Heurtebise 2017; Roetz 2013). Roetz (2013) argued that just as the environmentally destructive behavior is not rooted in any specific culture but generally in human culture, so too is the discovery and problematization of anthropocentrism (a human-centered point of view). According to Smil (2003, cited in Snyder 2006), the philosophical ideals failed to significantly influence China’s ecological condition. Heurtebise (2017) referred

¹⁴ It should be noted that in 2006 Shinzō Abe, then prime minister of Japan, introduced the remarkably similar-sounding slogan “Beautiful Japan”. It was presented as a vision of “a nation that could both lead and be loved” and which is “endowed with a long history, culture, tradition and beautiful natural environment” (China Daily 2006). With Jing Sun (2012) having observed that China and Japan have a history of being “charm rivals” in regional diplomacy, it is possible that Hu Jintao’s “Beautiful China” was influenced by Abe’s concept.

¹⁵ Previously official media have translated the term as “ecological progress” or “conservation culture” rather than “ecological civilization” (Hansen et al. 2018, 195).

to ecological civilization as a “culturalist interpretation”, which he understands as “a political revamping of some cultural sources that goes often with a reification and nationalist interpretation of a specific cultural tradition” (ibid., 7) and argued that any attempt to reduce Chinese culture to some essential characteristics would be misleading.

Scholars studying “traditions” in general have previously expressed similar concerns over their selective use and the subsequent creation of myths. Madsen (1995) asserted that a “mythical fact” can help establish the credibility of a certain narrative, but such “facts” about a complex society like China are almost always ambiguous generalizations. Furthermore, he warned that while myths might create collective hope, they can also encompass significant dangers if accepted too uncritically. This has been affirmed by Hubbert’s (2015) study, which observed that “the environment” trope serves as a sort of “master narrative” that defines governments and citizens as cosmopolitan subjects. She explained that environmental concern is more than just ecological modernization: it is also about branding in a global arena where environmentalism – e.g., actions demonstrating a concern for protecting the natural environment – indicates modern belonging (ibid., 31). Apart from that, the East vs. West binary resembles how post-colonial societies often construct traditions and national identities with the help of the “double gaze”, i.e., by difference to the “Other” (Ashcroft et al. 2002).

3.2. The Evolution of “Ecological Civilization”

The political definition, goals, and measures of achieving ecological civilization remained an abstract idea for a long while (Oswald 2014). It was only under Xi’s endorsement that the term was transformed into a more implementable and globally-oriented vision. Unlike his predecessors, who saw the environmental crisis as a social and political threat, Xi has turned it into a positive narrative (Goron 2018). Ecological civilization has come to constitute a broader moral guide to proper civil behavior and attitude, encompassing older socialist models, which were restored and given new ecological meanings conforming with the new vision (Hansen et al. 2018).

Apart from ecological civilization’s philosophical and socialist foundation, science and technology also gradually became driving forces behind the concept. However, the fact that the literature showed contradictory analyses of this aspect reveals that the discourse is not as straightforward. On the one hand, Hansen et al. (2018) reported that the inclusion of science and technology into the realm of ecological civilization began with a recognition that many domestic and global environmental issues can be traced back to China’s own economic

development, which consequently led to dropping the claim of a specifically “Western black modernization”. Goron (2018), on the other hand, argued that Xi’s ecological civilization discourse has only exacerbated the opposite arguments and emphasized the exclusivity of Chinese “ecological wisdom”. She reported that Chinese theorists now portray ecological civilization as the next natural step in the evolution, towards which only China can lead the world.

Under Xi’s reign, ecological civilization has also become closely linked to the goal of continued economic growth. Xi’s famous metaphor, widely used in speeches on ecological civilization, states that “green waters and lush mountains” will provide “gold and silver”¹⁶ (ibid., 197), suggesting the economic rationale for environmental care. While there are some instances where environmental protection takes precedence over economic development, Schmitt’s (2016) study showed that China’s commitment to economic growth is a fundamental characteristic of Xi’s ecological civilization. Only a few articles on ecological civilization analyzed in Hansen et al.’s (2018, 196) study linked the term to a “‘unique Chinese tradition’ of ‘economic self-restraint’”, with most authors neither disapproving of economic growth nor arguing for radical measures to stop the environmental crisis. Including these new layers of meaning, ecological civilization is now promoted as “a vision of society characterized by ecologically sustainable modes of resource extraction, production and trade, inhabited by environmentally conscious and responsible citizens” (ibid., 196), achievable through technological and scientific advancements, proper political decision-making, and control.

Overall, the reviewed literature revealed diverse interpretations of the ecological civilization rhetoric, indicating a general confusion with the term. Lord (2018) reported that the majority conceives ecological civilization as retaining the economic and political status quo while incorporating a few environmental elements into the current model. Hubbert (2015) suggested that the concept does not offer any uniquely alternative approach to those globally established concepts such as sustainable development. For other scholars, ecological civilization constitutes a utopian vision of a harmonious world with no Western equivalent. A vision built on the past, of which the anticipated achievement is projected into the future, making it merely a fantasy which in turn conceals the real danger in the present (Lord 2018; Marinelli 2018). Then again, others have argued that the now globally-oriented idea of building ecological civilization embodies something discursively new (Lord 2018; Hansen et al. 2018). For instance, Geall and Ely (2018) found glimmers of hope in the PRC government’s emphasis

¹⁶ In Chinese: *Lü shui qingshan jiushi jinshan yin shan* 绿水青山就是金山银山.

on environmental protection, arguing that China's environmental narratives can create real "pathways of change". Li and Shapiro (2020) reported that more and more international forums, publications, and civil organizations publicly laud China's environmental vision, signaling that in times of profound environmental concern, the idea of using authoritarian methods to accomplish environmental goals appears to gain increasing global appeal.

In summary, it can be observed that, over time, ecological civilization has combined references to various ideologies that reflect the attitudes and political tactics of consecutive leaderships (Goron 2018, 43). Due to this apparent vagueness and constant adaptation of the grand idea, research has interpreted it differently. However, the scholarship generally agrees that China's environmental narratives require nuance and deserve ongoing monitoring as they evolve (Hansen et al. 2018; Geall and Ely 2018). The fact that the concept of ecological civilization constitutes, so far, the only formulated vision of our global future focusing on the environment additionally underscores the importance of gaining a better understanding of it (Hansen et al. 2018). In Goron's view (2018, 50), a constructive intellectual debate on sustainability involving China is not possible when "theory and practice are confused", or "when the global rise of China is simplistically equated with the replacement of an 'ecocidal' Western hegemony by a presumably more 'ecologically civilized' Chinese hegemony".

Geall and Ely (2018) anticipate that whether China's "pathways of change" succeed, or fail, will impact the CCP's *huayu quan*¹⁷, and consequently, the potential of China to assume a more dominant leadership role in GEG. Li and Shapiro (2020) also warn against the apparent movement of romanticizing China's "authoritarian environmentalism". Based on specific case studies, they concluded that there is as much to admire about the CCP's decisiveness on environmental matters as there is to fear, suggesting that China's governance style should be better understood as "environmental authoritarianism" (ibid., 20f.).

4. Methodology and Data

With the PRC government having various means for discourse production at its disposal, there are also multiple ways to research how it envisions its role in GEG. This vision could be expressed, for instance, in the CCP leadership's public statements, policy documents, or in the state-controlled media. For reasons I account for in what follows, this thesis uses the discourse

¹⁷ The term *huayu quan* 话语权 refers to "the influence generated by the logic, values, and ideologies contained in a nation's discussions and public discourse" (Eto 2017). It can relate to international power and influence, as well to leading the domestic public discourse to preserve ideological control.

analysis method to focus specifically on reports published in China's international media outlet *China Daily* during two decisive events and examines how the PRC leadership constructs its global image there. In the following subchapters, I also explain the successive steps taken during the analysis.

4.1. Discourse Analysis

Although diverse meanings are associated with the term “discourse”, it is most commonly understood as linguistic action, which can be expressed in verbal, non-verbal, or visual communication (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008, 4f.). It draws back to the father of discourse theory, Michel Foucault (2002), who used the term to describe the relationship between language and human knowledge. In this thesis, I rely on Schneider's (2013a) definition of discourse and understand it as communication practices, which can both reflect and actively construct our understanding of reality and social relations. In other words, discourses are not only constituted but also constitutive. The constitutive effect of discourse – hence its power to form commonly shared constructions of reality in society – can be further enhanced by dissemination to large audiences, as it is in the case of mass media (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008, 32). Thus, it can be expected that the party's international media outlets are most likely to represent a broader official discourse.

Schneider (forthcoming, 93) describes “discourse analysis” as a “detail-oriented language analysis”, which studies how linguistic choices can affect meanings. It allows researchers to examine how political meanings and beliefs are transmitted in Chinese media outlets and learn about the underlying values and assumptions that inform them. This method can also reveal how China seeks to present itself to the global public to justify and persuade it to support its actions. Accordingly, it presented itself as the most suitable methodology to answer my research questions.

Based on the literature review findings, I opted for conducting a comparative analysis of two timeframes, also called a “diachronic discourse analysis”. As Jäger's (2004, cited in Schneider 2013a) definition of discourses as “the flows of knowledge” reveals, discourses can gradually change. Such analysis thus enables analysts to determine whether the official discourse on China's role in GEG shifted over time and how these changes may reflect the various attitudes or beliefs held by the PRC government at different times. In my study, I combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Before starting with the qualitative analysis, I first conducted a headline analysis of a bigger sample. Such a quantitative approach

can provide an overview of the main themes and help identify the most relevant articles for closer analysis. Since discourse can also be contained in visual content, I should specify here that I solely studied the written content of the articles.

4.2. Research Materials

The choice of the particular media outlet as research material was based on two criteria: it had to 1) explicitly express “the party line” and 2) target relevant international audiences. As the largest and most authoritative English-language Chinese newspaper, often regarded as the “Voice of China” and the “mouthpiece for the party in its efforts to communicate with the wider world” (Chen 2012, 309; cited in Hartig 2018), *China Daily* appeared the obvious choice. The newspaper’s target group also fits the criterium of “relevant international audiences”, as it consists mainly of foreign diplomats and expatriates within China as well as influential opinion-makers and intellectuals overseas (Hartig 2018, 125). The newspaper’s website (*chinadaily.com.cn*), which contains nearly all the content published in the print titles and a significant amount of exclusive online stories, has become one of the most important platforms for the Chinese government to make its voice heard globally. For this reason – along with the fact that digitized content is generally better suited for textual analysis because of its easier “searchability” and “editability” – I limited myself to consulting articles published online.

I identified two discursive events in the process of China’s emergence as a potential GEG leader, which are likely to have generated increased public discussion and reporting. Studying discursive events is also of value as they can significantly shift the discourse. The first timeframe, from 1/06/2017 to 1/09/2017, covers the three months following Trump’s retreat from the Paris Agreement on June 1st, 2017. The literature revealed that this announcement sparked a heated media debate on whether China would replace the US as a leader of GEG. The second timeframe, from 22/09/2020 to 22/12/2020, follows Xi’s announcement of “Climate Neutrality 2060” on September 22nd, 2020. The literature review established that some have interpreted Xi’s pledge as a significant new milestone in China’s environmental leadership efforts.

Using *China Daily*’s advanced search function, I selected relevant articles for the headline analysis using two sets of keywords for each timeframe: (1) “*China; global; environmental; leader/leadership*”, (2) “*ecological civilization*”. I determined the keywords based on an initial pilot study that identified which words occur in most articles set in a relevant context. The initial study also indicated that the themes of China’s role in GEG and China’s

environmental rhetoric are often discussed separately. Using these two sets of keywords, I was able to identify both types of articles, resulting in a total of 80 reports for the headline analysis.

The search generated 56 results (37 for the first set of keywords; 19 for the second set) for the first timeframe. Because of the technical limitations of the keyword search function, some of the articles were not directly related to the topic.¹⁸ In this set, I identified 25 such instances and one duplicate. Subsequently, I excluded them from the data corpus, adjusting the total number of articles to 30. For the second timeframe, 90 articles were found (44 with the first set of keywords, 46 with the second set). Again, I had to exclude 40 articles for not being thematically related and seven for appearing in both sets, which reduced the total number to 49.

In the next step, I conducted a headline analysis. Based on the results of the headline analysis and according to the scope and time constraints of this study, I then determined a smaller sample size of six articles for closer analysis and additional 14 articles (seven from each timeframe) for comparison purposes. Subsequently, I applied the “evolutionary coding”¹⁹ approach to code the articles for the discourse analysis.

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter is divided into three sections. I begin by discussing the results of the quantitative headline analysis in section 5.1. and proceed with discussing the findings of the qualitative discourse analysis in section 5.2. That chapter is further divided into four subsections (5.2.1 – 5.2.4) corresponding to the overarching themes that emerged from the discourse analysis. Finally, in section 5.3. I discuss the findings in a more focused manner and relate them to the literature review.

5.1. Headline Analysis Findings

I examined the headlines of the entire set of 79 articles²⁰ to identify and categorize them according to recurring themes. In this process, I singled out five main themes: (1) *China’s stances on GEG affairs*, (2) *China’s role in GEG affairs*, (3) *China’s environmental plans and*

¹⁸ For example, all keywords from the first set appear in an article titled “Kering major part of bold future of luxury in China”. The content of this piece concerns a French luxury group and is in no way related to my research focus. As for the keyword “ecological civilization”, there were multiple instances where the articles only referred to “civilization”; “civil”, or “civilized”, yet still appeared among the results.

¹⁹ “Evolutionary coding”, a concept introduced by Mayring (2002, cited in Schneider 2013b), refers to the process of specifying the coding categories as one moves back-and-forth through the empirical data.

²⁰ For the complete list of considered articles, see Appendix 1.

achievements, (4) *Philosophical and conceptual foundation*, (5) *Civil and local examples*.

Before discussing the findings, I should note the limitations of this headline analysis. Judging a theme based solely on a single headline is subjective. Moreover, some articles may contain multiple themes, making categorizing them challenging. A later review of the articles' contents confirmed the close interconnection of the themes, which is why the categories should not be considered as clearly divided from each other.²¹ Similarly, the assumption that a headline's theme reflects the article's content may not always be accurate. To minimize the number of wrongly classified articles, I have thus occasionally considered the short excerpt appearing under each article on *China Daily's* results page.

Figure 1 – Main Themes (distribution in percent)

Main Themes	Timeframe 1¹ (T1) 1/06/2017 – 1/09/2017	Timeframe 2² (T2) 22/09/2020 – 22/12/2020	Both timeframes³
<i>1) China's stances on GEG affairs</i>	33%	8%	18%
<i>2) China's role in GEG affairs</i>	10%	24%	19%
<i>3) China's environmental plans and achievements</i>	23%	39%	33%
<i>4) Philosophical and conceptual foundation</i>	10%	14%	13%
<i>5) Civil and local examples</i>	23%	14%	18%

¹Total = 30; ²Total = 49; ³Total = 79

Although limited, the headline analysis helped to gather general observations on the discourse strands and their development over time. While drawing conclusions from such initial impressions is risky, it might also help formulate first hypotheses, which can be further explored in the qualitative analysis. Furthermore, looking at the headlines is of value, as it can tell us something about editorial priorities.

Firstly, the fact that the second timeframe generated more results (49) than the first one (30) could indicate an overall greater relevance attributed to environmental protection or to shaping such an image of China for foreign audiences. As for the results themselves, one of the most notable findings is the shift in proportion between the two timeframes in the number of headlines expressing China's stance on GEG matters (T1:33%; T2:8%) and those specifically referring to China's role in GEG (T1:10%; T2:24%), which could signal that by 2020, China's role in GEG took a more active character.

²¹ For example, although the headline "Paris climate deal is 'irreversible'" (T1K112) indicates expressing China's stance on GEG, it was also found to discuss China's role in GEG.

Another observation relates to the high percentage (82%) of articles in the first timeframe expressing direct criticism of the US, for instance: “US’ climate mistake will cost it dear” (T1K106) or “Trump gives the world more reasons to save our planet” (T1K101). The fact that the number of such headlines has decreased in the second timeframe can be explained by the different discursive events surrounding each timeframe. Nevertheless, these results suggest that the discourse on China’s role in GEG is closely connected to the broader discourse of Sino–US geopolitical tensions.

With ten headlines referring to Xi’s thoughts and actions²², the results also reaffirm the major role taken by Xi in GEG and in shaping the conceptual foundation behind China’s environmental measures. As for environmental slogans, “green growth/development” occurred eight times in the set²³, the idea of “Chinese renaissance” was evoked twice (T1K207; T2K202) and “Beautiful China” once (T2K203).

Finally, the headline analysis helped identify articles for qualitative analysis. Since the articles indicating themes (1), (2), and (4) are most likely to contain discourse strands relevant to my research question, I decided to select two articles for each theme within this data set of 38 (T1:16; T2:21) articles. To further narrow down the selection of the articles, I eliminated articles with headlines least indicative of referring to my research question and conducted a brief review of the contents of the remaining articles. I attempted to include one article from each timeframe for each theme to examine whether the discourse has shifted over time. However, in the case of theme (4), I could not determine any qualitatively relevant article within the data set of the second timeframe. For this reason, I chose two articles from the first timeframe instead. To avoid drawing false conclusions, I decided to later compare my results with another seven articles from each theme selected based on relevance.²⁴ Again, I had to select from articles assigned to the *civil and local examples* category because of difficulties with identifying relevant articles within the theme (4).

5.2. Discourse Analysis Findings

In the following subsections, I discuss the four main discourse strands that emerged from the quantitative analysis.²⁵ The analysis uncovers the main features of the official discourse surrounding China’s environmental ambitions and its role in GEG during two specific

²² E.g., “Xi’s vision drives nation’s fresh green philosophy” (T2K224) or “Global experts laud Xi’s plan on biodiversity” (T2K205).

²³ T1K115, T1K116, T2K102, T2K112, T2K113, T2K119, T2K123, T2K218.

²⁴ The specific articles selected for closer analysis and comparison are highlighted in Appendix 1.

²⁵ For the applied coding categories, refer to Appendix 2.

timeframes. It also looks at how the editors use communication strategies to shape the articles' discursive realities.

5.2.1. *China's Environmental Achievements and Contributions to GEG*

Overall, all articles portray China as a valuable member of the international community, playing an increasingly proactive role in the GEG framework. The state's contribution to securing the Paris Agreement and its full commitment to global climate cooperation, sustainable development, and multilateralism are repeatedly highlighted throughout the data set. The articles also consistently emphasize China's position as a world leader in renewable energy and the state's willingness to assist other developing countries to mitigate climate change and transition to clean energy. In the succeeding paragraphs, I explore these aspects in more detail and show how the authors construct this image of China.

One of the first things that stands out about the articles' discourse on China's environmental achievements and its contributions to GEG is the editors' use of different strategies to legitimate them. The first strategy I identified is the high intertextuality the articles contain. By inserting direct and indirect quotes, the authors can create a more convincing narrative. For instance, article T2K122 about China's commitment to multilateralism uses quotes from high-level Chinese and non-Chinese actors. It begins with a quote from the Chinese vice-minister of ecology and environment, Zhao Yingmin, stating that "committed to multilateralism, China has been playing an active part in global governance on environment and climate change". Inserting this direct quote, which makes a self-evident statement, adds validity to the claims and indirectly pushes this exact interpretation onto the reader. In a latter part, the article incorporates multiple direct and indirect quotes of the United Nations Environmental Programme's (UNEP) executive director's²⁶, Inger Andersen, where she shares her insights on the GEO-6²⁷. Subsequently, she is quoted referring to China being the host of the COP15:

'I am pleased to see China's efforts to address these complex challenges. You *are* committed to a more nature-focused society,' she said. 'And I look forward to China's leadership at Kunming ...we need a game-changing post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and with *China's strong and ambitious leadership*, we *can* get there.'²⁸ (T2K122).

²⁶ Established in 1972, UNEP is the leading environmental authority within the UN system.

²⁷ GEO-6 stands for the UNEP's sixth Global Environment Outlook published in 2019.

²⁸ All emphasized words in this thesis are added by the author.

By inserting a direct quote of an actor, whose credibility has been established in the former paragraphs, and who makes an affirmative statement about China's commitment, the article paints an image of a "strong", "ambitious", and "committed to nature-focused society", without China having to make these claims itself. Moreover, the use of the modal verb "can" conveys a sense of certainty and confidence about China's performance as the host of COP15.

Similarly, article T2K103 quotes the director-general of UN Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, confidently stating that China "can take *a very active role* and *lead the way* in offering new initiatives on fighting the climate emergency and be on the forefront of sustainable behavior", as well as "*play a very important role* in building the new multilateral system". As leading figures from the UN system, Andersen's and Valovaya's statements on China's role in GEG carry great weight and can serve as powerful frames for how the reader should perceive China. *China Daily* editors seem aware of this, as Andersen's quotes were also found in other articles (T2K104; T2K103).

Quoting experts to legitimize a specific action or claim was often used in the context of Xi's "Climate Neutrality 2060" pledge. For instance, the article T2K105 from the comparison set consisted almost entirely of direct and indirect quotes evaluating that pledge, such as that of the Climate Group's CEO, Helen Clarkson, who self-evidently stated: "*there is no doubt that* efforts from China *will* play a major role in shaping how the rest of the world progresses on climate action." It also included an indirect quote of Xie Zhenhua, China's top climate diplomat, stating that "the move shows that the country has lived up to its responsibility as a major country".

Another framing method employed by the articles is the use of strong superlatives and emphasizing adjectives. Superlatives occurred particularly often when the articles discussed China's renewable energy accomplishments. In this context, China was described with nominal phrases such as "*by far the largest* wind and solar power producer in the world" (T2K121) or "*a leader* in the use of new and renewable sources of energy" (T1K115). The articles from the comparison set²⁹ also framed China's achievements in a superlative way. Emphasizing adjectives appeared most often in reference to the leader's environmental commitments. For example, China is reported to be "strongly" (T1K112) committed to the Paris Agreement. This commitment has been "repeatedly expressed", and the country is determined to deliver "100 percent" (T1K112). The use of this method serves not only the purpose of reinforcement and

²⁹ E.g., T1K110 and T1K117.

fortification of China's achievements but can also have broader implications for shaping a specific image of China. I will come back to this aspect in the next subchapter.

China's controversial developing status is also adopted as a discursive method to emphasize the country's achievements: "*Despite* facing huge challenges as the largest developing country, China has forged ahead on the environmental front" (T2K121). In this case, the discourse marker "despite", which is used to make an unexpected contrast, fortifies the latter statement. Moreover, the developing status is used to legitimate China's role as the country that can best assist "*other* developing countries" (T1K112; T1K110) with addressing climate change and providing clean technology. Highlighting China's developing status in this way also has other connotations that will be explored later.

Finally, the method that occurs most frequently and consistently throughout both timeframes is creating stark contrasts between China's and the US' actions. Ever since Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, this has become the dominant theme with which China's contributions to GEG are most often juxtaposed. For example: "China has injected 'huge confidence' in the international community by strongly committing to the Paris Agreement *despite* the US decision to cease contributing to global greenhouse reduction" (T1K112), or "China has made these achievements *despite* US President Donald Trump quitting the landmark Paris accord and rolling back many climate policies" (T2K121). Here, again, the preposition "despite" is used to enhance the grandness of China's actions. At the same time, it seems to assert China's maturity as a contributor to GEG and its independency from the US. Direct comparisons between China's and the US' actions are also recurring, for example:

While President Xi Jinping repeatedly expressed China's commitment on global climate cooperation and sustainable development during his trip to Germany from July 4-8, the United States was cited in the G20 final document as saying that it will 'immediately cease the implementation' of its current greenhouse gas reduction contribution (T1K112).

While the emphasis goal is evident in all three quotes, these comparisons also create a clear divide between the nations. The implications of that will be examined more thoroughly in what follows.

5.2.2. *Geopolitical Rivalry*

Geopolitical rivalry and, more specifically, the Sino-US relationship are highly prominent themes within the analyzed discourse. The findings, which I discuss in this section suggest that the employed communication methods and the actual stances taken by *China Daily* editors on

geopolitical rivalry are somewhat conflicting. However, altogether, they collectively construct an image of a moral and responsible China.

The previously discussed comparisons between the US and China are primarily built upon criticism of Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The authors interpreted this decision in highly pessimistic terms and strongly argued that Trump's decision will jeopardize "global efforts to save the planet" and, consequently, "ruin" it (T1K105). This narrative has undergone little change over time. The articles published in 2020 continued to point out how the "Trump administration's measures have undermined the global fight against climate change over the past almost four years" (T2K121).

A common characteristic of articles from both timeframes is being highly specific about whose actions they are criticizing. By consistently employing active tense, the authors clarify that it is Trump who "has effectively isolated the US from the global community and marginalized the country in the climate governance" (T1K112). However, exiting the Paris Agreement is not the only "crime" on Trump's list:

The trade and technology wars Trump has launched, and the other unilateral and protectionist measures he has taken have created major hurdles for the climate fight in China and many other countries, as they have disrupted other countries' supply chains and created trade barriers (T2K121).

As can be seen, the article also links the discourse on climate change to that of the China–US trade war. Using active tense, it then places the responsibility for launching the trade war, and, consequently, for "creating major hurdles for the climate fight", on Trump.

Another identified communication method concerns creating sharp contrasts with the conjunction "except" and the phrase "all but one". This method is used to highlight China's condemnation of Trump's withdrawal and the US' isolation from the international community resulting from it: "The leaders of G20 members, *except* US President Donald Trump, said on Saturday that the Paris Climate Change Agreement is 'irreversible'", or more indirectly, "Qi said that *all but one* of the major economies chose to fulfill their pledges on the historic climate agreement" (T1K112).

The specific framing methods used in the articles also convey a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion with Trump's uncompromising stance, for example: "Insiders said G20 officials sought but failed to gain last-minute compromises from the US" or "'Take it or leave it, and no more bargaining. That is the Hamburg G20 answer to Donald Trump's US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement,' said Qi Ye" (T1K112).

It is also important to mention that in all the considered articles, even where no direct comparison is drawn between China and the US, the criticism is always followed by paragraphs

discussing China's environmental achievements. This consistent comparison between China's grand commitments and those of the US, as well as the use of active tense and excluding conjunctions successfully create a strong protagonist and antagonist narrative. In this story, the US, or more specifically, Trump, is the villain, and China, the savior.

With the 2020 election of Joe Biden, this narrative had to be adjusted. The article T2K121 referred to that presidential transition in seemingly enthusiastic terms stating: "Biden's pledge to rejoin the Paris accord and convene the leaders of major economies for a climate summit within his first 100 days in office is indeed an encouraging sign". However, the further paragraphs of this article reveal that this discourse is not that straightforward. The author uses this opportunity to emphasize who is both historically and currently most responsible for contributing to the climate crisis: "That said, the US is by far the biggest historical emitter, and its per capita emission is still more than twice that of China's". It also mentions the EU's historical responsibility: "The European Union, another major historical emitter, is aspiring to be a global leader in the fight against climate change." Article T2K116 from the comparison set follows the same discursive structure after discussing Biden's victory:

The US accounts for about 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. But it produces the highest volume of greenhouse gases when measured on a per capita basis. And considering the greenhouse gases it has emitted during its industrial development in the past several decades, the world's largest and strongest economy owes a huge emissions reduction debt to the world.

At this point, it should be noted that China's significant contribution to climate change is never directly brought up in the articles. Article T1K105 merely mentions the environmental challenges that China is facing: "Given the severe air pollution, China is facing a huge challenge on the environmental front". By not specifying any reason for the air pollution, the framing might as well implicate China being a "victim" of some force majeure.

Coming back to *China Daily's* framing of Joe Biden becoming the US president, I would like to highlight how the previously mentioned article T2K116 concludes. It states that even under Biden's administration, there "will still be a lot to be done to make up for the damage its [the US'] withdrawal has caused the multilateral forum". Consequently, it ends with a rhetorical question, which indicates the argument this article is trying to make: "furthermore, can the world trust the United States not to withdraw again?". By raising such a skeptical and suggestive rhetorical question and connecting Biden's victory to the discourse strand of the US' historical and present responsibility for the climate crisis, the narrative of the US as the antagonist is upheld.

However, this specific discourse should be understood in the broader context of fortified tensions between the two countries since 2020. This “turbulent” (T2K121) relationship is reflected in the substantially more defensive tone of the articles’ statements. For instance, the article T2K104 from the comparison set discusses a factsheet published by the US, which lists “what it alleges are China’s environmental abuses”. The author comments that “Washington has simply made itself a laughing stock” by publishing it. It also argues that picking up environmental issues as a topic “to badmouth China only suggests how desperate they [US’ politicians] are in their attempt to tarnish the image of the country they consider to be an immediate potential rival of the US”.

Although all the methods mentioned above contribute to reinforcing the divide between those two nations, the examined articles from both timeframes take a univocal critical stance on engaging in geopolitical rivalries. The authors uniformly argue that “the Paris accord [...] is about efforts to combat climate change rather than a geopolitical jostling between the US and China” (T1K105) and that “China and the US [...] should again join hands in the fight against climate change, because it is a far greater threat to both countries than their many differences” (T2K121). Article T2K121 also refers to the EU, arguing that “they [US and EU] should cease or at least drastically lower the temperature of geopolitical rivalries [...] otherwise, the global battle against climate change is doomed to failure”. By using the active tense, the article specifies that the US and the EU are igniting the geopolitical rivalries. In contrast, China is portrayed as the “the moral one” that would not engage in such “trivial” matters and only has “eyes” for the greater goal of fighting climate change. The statement also contains a threatening connotation due to the language construction “should...otherwise”.

As illustrated by the following quote, this discourse strand is loaded with criticism which can fulfill a discrediting function and at the same time further add to China’s “moral” image: “*It’s a pity that* some people see the great cause of combating climate change through their narrow geopolitical lens.” (T1K105). This quote is particularly compelling as it pushes the authors’ personal assessment on how the reader should perceive things. By expressing it in the passive tense, the framing effect is reinforced.

5.2.3. *The Leadership Question*

The articles’ objective to portray China as a responsible and moral member of the international community becomes even more evident in the leadership question discussion. The findings,

which I discuss in this subchapter, imply that the leadership question is much more complex and inconsistent than it would initially seem.

The articles from both timeframes generally suggest that China is not interested in openly declaring its leadership in GEG. Nevertheless, with the help of particular framing strategies, the authors seem to suggest exactly that, though indirectly. The article T1K105 is illustrative of that indirect leadership claim. Although it argues that “China has never claimed to be a global leader”, it also emphasizes that it “is playing such a role in some areas, especially climate change”. The previously discussed use of superlatives and the strong comparisons drawn between China and other relevant members of the GEG framework add to that image.

Not wanting to openly claim leadership constitutes an integral part of constructing the image of a “moral” China. The morality argument is particularly visible in the article T1K105. The following quote refers to the discussion on China taking over the US’ place as a leader of GEG, which emerged after Trump’s withdrawal:

Officials and climate experts in the NRDC, a global environmental advocacy group, *should* focus more on how Trump’s decision is going to ruin the planet, *rather than* on China assuming or not assuming global leadership. *If* there is a race in clean energy, it *should* be a friendly one because the world, especially the developing world, needs more clean technology. It *shouldn’t* matter whether it comes from China, the US, the European Union or any other economy, *because* the aim is to fulfill the goals set in the Paris agreement. [...] The world can be a better place *if* every country steps up to play a leadership role and fill the huge void created by the US’ pullout from the Paris pact (T1K105).

The use of normative phrases and modal verb constructions (“should...rather than”; “if...should”; “shouldn’t... because”; “...if...”) helps the author to construct an influential moral argument. It depicts China as a country motivated to participate in GEG solely for ethical reasons, such as considering the needs of the developing world and fulfilling the goals set in the Paris Agreement. By criticizing those engaging in the leadership debate, China’s role as the moral member of the international community, responsibly reminding others of the common goal, is reinforced.

However, article T1K104 from the comparison set reveals that upholding China’s “peaceful” image is not the only reason for not declaring leadership openly. The article quotes Guo Jiaofeng, an environmental analyst at a Chinese government think tank, who argues that “it is not appropriate to say China should assume a sole leadership role in the international community with the US withdrawal”. According to him, “parties in the pact should follow common but differentiated principles”. Because of that, “there is no need to change China’s pledges simply due to the departure of one key partner”, and therefore, “the world shouldn’t

push China too much”. These statements elucidate that the leadership question is also deeply interwoven with China’s developing status.

Whatever the reasons for China’s unwillingness to declare leadership may be, it is important to note that the discourse is not without inconsistencies. Whereas the previous article argued that China has never claimed to be a global leader, another article uncritically refers to China as “the new leader of global climate governance” (T1K112). The articles from the second timeframe were also not actively engaged in the leadership debate. Instead, they focused on depicting China as an increasingly active and important actor in GEG, letting the readers draw their own conclusions. The leadership aspect was only touched upon in quotes from foreign observers. For example, in article T2K103 from the comparison set, Andersen states that China “has had a tremendous success in demonstrating climate leadership in recent years [...]”.

5.2.4. Philosophical and Conceptual Foundation

Although the articles contained references to different rhetorical slogans³⁰, they all appear to be interconnected with the overarching concept of ecological civilization. The findings, which I discuss in what follows, shed further light on what this concept entails and how it is discursively constructed. They indicate that the discursive connection between ecological civilization and China’s role in GEG had not been substantially pronounced as of late 2020.

To begin with the ulterior motives behind the construction of ecological civilization, article T1K207 provided some illuminating insights. According to it, the concept was created out of China’s “best parts of traditional culture” that were “fit into the socialist core values”. The author argues that China’s “long and profound history” and “Chinese traditional culture” should be used as sources to seek solutions for modern problems. In doing so, China can demonstrate “cultural confidence”, which can “help other countries to distinguish China from the rest of the world” and “invigorate China’s power strategy”. Such cultural concepts can then “help the peaceful rise of China and contribute to world peace and development.” The following quote from article T1K203 illustrates how such “cultural confidence” might look in practice: “A wide variety of plants grow in China, Xi said, explaining that the Chinese people have held a deep respect for nature and a love for plants since ancient times”.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that, except as a slogan, ecological civilization has not yet been properly integrated into the broader discourse of China’s role in GEG. What can

³⁰ The articles also referred to “harmony between humans and nature” and “beautiful country”. However, the authors did not provide any further elaboration on those rhetorical slogans, and they were mentioned in the same context as ecological civilization.

be deduced from the gathered data is that building an ecological civilization is still largely considered a “national project” (T2K115). That was also underscored by another article which stated that “Xi said China will stick to innovative, coordinated, green, open and sharing development ideas to strengthen *its* ecological civilization, with the aim of building a beautiful *country*” (T1K203).

The only context in which China’s environmental thought was indicated to be more globally-oriented was in the following quote: “China’s efforts to promote green development have earned global recognition. The United Nations Environment Programme began touting China’s philosophy of ecological progress in February 2013 [...]” (T1K116). Firstly, the use of the term “ecological progress” shows that the English translation of *shengtai wenming* remained inconsistent even as late as 2017. Secondly, it illuminates that the “selling point” of ecological civilization in the global context is the idea of green development, which confirms my observations made based on the headline analysis’ results.

Illustrated by Xi’s saying about gold and green mountains discussed in Chapter 3.2, the ideas behind green growth and development are presented as “striking the right balance between environmental protection and economic growth” (T1K204). In total, this metaphor was evoked five times throughout four articles (T1K204; T1K115; T1K116; T1K117). Such a frequently used metaphor can serve as a powerful political tool, generating a particular perspective for perceiving and interpreting the world. It insists on a specific understanding of reality and ignores others, which presupposes ideology: the representation of the world from the viewpoint of a certain interest (Fairclough 1995). Here, the metaphor presents the capitalist perspective of the world as the universal truth while excluding perspectives where the rationale of economic growth does not necessarily dominate the world.

In general, the discourse on ecological civilization was filled with exemplary models and practical application examples congruent with the underlying values of that concept. By relating the concept to real-life circumstances, the articles enhance its legitimacy while also inviting the public to engage with it. Although Saihanba³¹, described as “the best footnote to President Xi Jinping’s philosophy” (T1K115), is presented as the primary model of ecological civilization, the articles also provide other “model examples” such as Xiantao in Hubei province. This is also where the discourse reveals significant inconsistencies.

³¹ Saihanba is a mechanized forest farm in Hebei province, which was transformed from “degraded land into a lush paradise” by an afforestation community (China Daily 2021).

In article T1K116, Xiantao is introduced as a prospective green city that has been “changed by President Xi Jinping’s green development philosophy recognizing clean water and lush mountains as priceless assets”. The article quotes the city’s party chief, who implies that ecological protection should be prioritized over economic growth: “We would rather slow down development than pollute the environment. [...] We would rather have less tax revenue than retain companies that harm the environment. [...] We always put ecosystem protection ahead of economic development.”. The same value system is evident in article T1K204, which refers to Xi Jinping’s metaphor explaining that “green mountains and clear water are more valuable than mountains of gold and silver”. However, in stark contrast, article T1K115 emphasizes that neither prioritizing “economic development at the cost of the environment”, nor pursuing “environmental protection while turning a blind eye to economic growth” is what “green growth” is about. The author warns that doing the latter “could compromise people’s livelihoods”. The latter part of the article also refers to Xi’s slogan, arguing “that the pursuit of harmony between humans and nature is about having both ‘gold mountains’ and ‘green mountains’”. These examples illustrate that, as of 2017, the idea behind green growth was still highly ambiguous. Simultaneously, they indicate that Xi’s seemingly straightforward slogan can be interpreted in different ways and can be therefore used to shape divergent meanings.

Despite these identified inconsistencies, the ideas contained in the articles are generally presented in a factual tone. For example, article T1K115 states that “*in China’s experiences of modernization and building an ecological civilization, environmental protection and economic growth are not incompatible*”. By referring to “China’s experiences” and using the affirmative “are not”, this statement is portrayed as a valid and trustworthy argument. Meanwhile, the experiences the article refers to remain unspecified. Nevertheless, by presenting the discourse as unquestionable “facts”, along with the inclusion of real-life examples, the concept is given a more legitimate and tangible meaning.

5.3. Discussion

In the following section, I further interpret my core findings and relate them to the academic debates presented in the literature review. This thesis was able to contribute new insights to the scholarship, and both confirm and contradict some of the previous scholarly assessments.

To begin with, the image that the examined *China Daily* articles present of China’s role in GEG is miles away from that of a “wrecker” of international climate negotiations (Gao 2018). As indicated by the literature review, China’s contribution to securing the Paris

Agreement and Xi Jinping's 2020 climate pledge were the two most important milestones used to construct this new positive image. Although not specifically a milestone, China's engagement in upholding the multilateral system emerged as another significant aspect utilized by *China Daily* to shape the image of a cooperative China. This corresponds with Öterbülbul's (2021) observation, namely that Beijing embraced a new role as a defender of multilateralism under Xi's reign. In accordance with that, all articles took a univocal hardline stance on geopolitical rivalry.

Nonetheless, the geopolitical tensions with the US were reflected in a large part of the discourse, and criticism and comparison with the US were by far the most common methods of presenting China as a responsible and moral GEG participant. Effectively, such contrasting actively contributes to the rivalry and reinforces the divide between these two countries. Thus, similarly to what Ashcroft et al. (2002) observed about post-colonial societies, China's role in GEG seems to be largely constructed by the East (China) vs. West (US) binary and the difference from the "Other".

Although the statements discussing Biden's inauguration seemed optimistic on the surface, rather than this presidential shift casting doubt on Chinese climate leadership as suggested by Rudd (2020), the articles reversed this narrative. Instead, they questioned whether the US could still be trusted as a GEG leader. In this context, the articles also highlighted the historical and current climate change responsibility of the US and the EU. In contrast, neither China's historical environmental destruction (Elvin 2004) nor the fact that China has been the world's biggest carbon emitter since 2006 (Qi et al. 2020) were ever mentioned.

The discourse analysis was particularly illuminative concerning the leadership question. Contrary to the narrative presented in many media articles (e.g., Klare 2017), *China Daily* has generally refrained from openly claiming China's leadership in GEG. As outlined in the literature review, given China's increasingly confident presence on the international stage, many international observers expected the Chinese leadership to be eager to expand its global influence in this way. Instead, the stances taken in the articles emphasized the triviality of the leadership question and appealed for paying greater attention to fulfilling the goals of the Paris Agreement. Representing such a moral stance could indicate that China is indeed only interested in the global fight to save our planet. Yet, it is more likely that the country does not wish to exacerbate the "China threat" narrative, which could have resulted from China openly assuming a more prominent position in global governance (see e.g., Öterbülbul 2021). At the same time, the findings revealed that China's reluctance to openly declare leadership is

connected to its unreadiness to forego the CBDR principle and China's "right to develop", which seems to confirm some scholars' critical assessments (Hilton 2017; Economy 2017).

Despite my findings indicating that China is not interested in openly declaring leadership, this does not necessarily mean that China does not wish the global public to think of it as a leader. The communication methods used in the articles appear to let China's stances, environmental achievements, and the opinions of prominent experts speak for themselves. Since these are usually expressed in superlative terms, they could indirectly lead the readers to conclude that China is, indeed, the new GEG leader. By constructing the discourse that way, China's leadership position appears, overall, more trustworthy, less intimidating, and the image of a "peaceful rise of China" can be upheld. Altogether, I was able to show that the official discourse on the leadership question is neither entirely homogenous nor is it by any means straightforward. Articles from the second timeframe also did not indicate that China's stance on this matter has significantly shifted in the light of Xi's September 2020 pledge, as suggested by Rudd (2020).

Contrary to what the literature review suggested (e.g., Goron 2018; Hansen et al. 2018), the findings of this study show that, as of late 2020, "building an ecological civilization" remained a primarily national objective. There were already prior hints to that observation, which I explained in the methodology and headline analysis chapters (4.2.; 5.1.). It is also important to note that in the first timeframe, the term "ecological progress" was used to refer to ecological civilization. That shows that the inconsistencies in the English translation of the concept observed by Hansen et al. (2018) in the context of Hu Jintao's 2012 speech were still present in 2017. If ecological civilization continues to target the domestic public and will not eliminate the translation inconsistencies, it is valid to assume that the promotion of the concept as a soft power initiative once again fails to appeal to the foreign public as in the mid-2000s (Heurtebise 2017).

All things considered, the concept has undergone major changes since it was first introduced. The analyzed discourse was generally presented in a factual tone, and a large part of it was constituted by relating the concept to real-life examples. Hansen et al. (2018, 200) already noted this shift and highlighted that in Chinese society, exemplarity has a long history of being considered to carry a "highly powerful transformative moral force". I agree with the scholars' conclusion that this development is indicative of the government no longer perceiving ecological civilization "as an abstract ideal" but instead wanting to present it "as a plausible vision which can be achieved in practice" (ibid.).

The discourse analysis could also confirm that the concept is based on the interpretation of a specific part of “traditional culture” (Pan 2006), which is combined with “socialist core values” (Hansen et al. 2018). The line of argument presented in one of the articles is that China’s long history can solve modern problems. The literature review already highlighted the problematic nature of such culturalist interpretations (e.g., Heurtebise 2017; Roetz 2013). However, as pointed out by Goron (2018), invoking traditional cultural values can also be used as a powerful political tool to legitimize China’s alleged “ecological wisdom” (Pan 2006). The analyzed article argued that such concepts could be the solution to strengthen China’s global power and show the world that there is no other country as culturally confident as China. Ecological civilization can thus help further differentiate China from other GEG participants, such as the US or EU, which again evokes the East vs. West binary (Ashcroft et al. 2002). The mentioned “cultural confidence” could provide China a reputational boost on the world stage and strengthen its “discourse power”, as suggested by Geall and Ely (2018). The implications of this argument seem to be connected to what Hubbert (2015) observed, namely that environmentalism now came to indicate modern belonging in the global arena and is essentially all about branding.

My research also confirmed Schmitt’s (2016) findings, who observed that China’s commitment to economic growth seems to be a fundamental characteristic of Xi’s ecological civilization. Furthermore, I was able to provide new insights by observing the inconsistencies regarding whether environmental protection or economic growth is higher on the scale of importance according to the “green growth” idea. Apart from economic growth and development, I could also confirm that ecological civilization, in its current form, is discursively connected with science and technology (Hansen et al. 2018).

6. Conclusion

Given the ever-increasing prominence of China and the Chinese rhetoric in global governance, the purpose of this thesis was to study the official international discourse of the PRC government on China’s role in GEG. This resulted in the following main question: *How does the PRC government portray its role in Global Environmental Governance, and to what extent are Chinese environmental concepts incorporated in this global vision?* I also attempted to investigate the values and assumptions this global vision reflects and determine to what extent this discourse has been shifting over time. The main findings resulting from this study are the following.

Overall, the image of China that the articles convey is that of an active, cooperative, and valuable participant in GEG. China is also presented as a responsible, peaceful, and, above all, moral member of the international community. This image is collectively shaped by emphasizing China's environmental achievements, its full commitment to the Paris Agreement and global climate cooperation, the support of the developing countries, and the consistent emphasis on the importance of saving the planet. By emphasizing the "triviality" of the leadership debate, the articles largely (with one exception) brush off the GEG leadership speculations, thereby fortifying China's moral image.

However, the narrative was found not to be as consistent and straight-forward as it first appeared. Despite China's utterly critical stance towards geopolitical rivalry, its moral image is largely constructed by creating a strong protagonist (China) – antagonist (US) narrative. The motivations behind China's unwillingness to claim leadership are also not uniform. While one article indicated that the reason for avoiding a straight-forward declaration of leadership is that China is not willing to sacrifice its developing country privileges, it also seems valid to assume that China does not wish to undermine its long-standing foreign policy goal of upholding the image of a "peaceful rise". While the real motivation is most likely somewhere in-between, in practice, the various discursive methods used in the articles seem to collectively push a frame on its readers to think of China as *the* leader of GEG.

When it comes to the second part of the research question, I found that although the concept of ecological civilization constitutes by far the most prominent environmental concept within the international discourse on China's GEG role, as of late 2020, it appeared to be used as nothing more than a slogan in the global context, and its objective remained focused on China. In contrast, in the Chinese context, the political and societal meaning of ecological civilization has to a large extent been established, though there are still some significant inconsistencies within the discourse, such as whether ecological protection or economic growth should be more valued. Based on a combination of traditional culture and socialist core values, the latest "version" of the concept is now also closely connected to the idea of "green growth" and encompasses aspects related to science and technology.

With a large amount of the discourse being devoted to the Sino–US rivalry, the question arises to what extent the active participation in GEG is indeed motivated by the "common good", as continuously emphasized in the *China Daily* articles, and not merely by being another place of contestation of the two world powers. The fact that the foundation and goal of China's ecological civilization concept, as well as the resulting "cultural confidence" aim to differentiate it from other participating countries even further, only underscores this concern.

Although the recent China–US Climate Agreement at the COP26 offers a flicker of hope, only time can tell whether cooperation on climate change can truly be divided from the long-standing geopolitical tensions of these two economic superpowers.

As argued in previous research (Geall and Ely 2018), China’s focus on developing powerful environmental narratives could potentially create real “pathways of change”, generate a broader sustainability awareness, and even motivate larger institutional and discursive shifts. However, the findings of the reviewed discourse also highlight that such narratives should not be taken at face value. At this moment, China’s vision of achieving “green waters and lush mountains” while pursuing limitless economic growth thanks to the combination of ancient “ecological wisdom” and all-problems-solving advanced technology seems to need a few more iterations.

That leads me to state the limitations of this study and discuss opportunities for further research. Firstly, it is important to note that it is impossible to know exactly what the governments’ motivations and aims for producing a certain type of discourse are. Discourse analysis can only reveal what kind of communication methods the journalists employ, in this case, 16 authors of 20 articles. Being restricted to two timeframes with a total duration of six months and having reviewed only 20 articles, out of which only six were qualitatively analyzed, is a further limitation. The discourse I have captured in this thesis represents only a small part of a much wider discourse on this topic. It is possible that articles published before or after the considered timeframes made different arguments and used other communication strategies.

Furthermore, my analysis only considered articles published by *China Daily*. Since the discourse in this specific newspaper already contained several inconsistencies, it cannot be excluded that, for example, Xi’s public speeches or another party-controlled medium such as Xinhua could potentially present a slightly different discourse. With that said, one aspect on which future studies could focus is examining the consistency of the discourse by comparing various sources of discourse production. Additionally, both the COP15, with its theme including China’s “ecological civilization”, and the COP26, with the announcement of a joint US-China climate cooperation, constitute highly relevant discursive events, which deserve adequate analysis to see whether the party line has changed.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, full discourse analysis is never possible, and the above-stated limitations did not impede my research on how *China Daily* portrayed China’s role in GEG at two different moments in time and to what extent the Chinese environmental concepts were incorporated in that presented vision. With this study, I was able to both confirm and contradict some of the previously made assessments and add new insights to the relatively

scarce English-language scholarship. In doing so, I was also able to fill an academic gap, add to a better understanding of China's role in GEG and shed light on the broader environmental implications of a global China. Since I outlined not only the environmental actions and achievements taken by China's leaders but also studied the overarching concepts and rhetoric behind them, this thesis also contributes to the debate on different approaches to environmentalism: A debate of unparalleled importance and urgency, given that the future of our planet and humanity depends on it.

As Castells (2009, 15f.) reminds us, discourse, as a combination of knowledge and language, legitimizes the exercising of power. With the help of discourse, dominating actors hold power over the thoughts that give rise to trust. They can then internalize and rationalize this power, which can be exercised without territorial boundaries in the age of globalization. With that said, it is of crucial importance to monitor the unfolding of the discourse of the leading powers on which we must rely if we are to save the planet and continuously scrutinize whether the ideas they bring to the table are worthy of our trust. Although China's environmental concepts are not yet as globally-oriented as assumed at the outset of this thesis, there are many indications that realizing the vision of a global ecological civilization could indeed soon become Xi Jinping's priority.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Articles (*China Daily*)

Legend:

- Articles used for closer analysis
- Articles used for comparison purposes

Timeframe 1 (01.06.2017 - 01.09.2017)

Abbreviation	Date	Author	Title
T1K101³²	03.06.2017	N/A	Trump gives the world more reasons to save our planet
T1K102	03.06.2017	N/A	Icy response to Trump climate move
T1K103	07.06.2017	N/A	Trump climate move backfires
T1K104	07.06.2017	Wang Yanfei	Beijing seeks teamwork in Paris pact
T1K105	09.06.2017	Chen Weihua	It's the planet, stupid, not China's global leadership
T1K106	13.06.2017	Laurence Tubiana	US' climate mistake will cost it dear
T1K107	13.06.2017	N/A	Climate downbeat after US departure
T1K108	16.06.2017	Yang Cheng	Successful Sino-Italian cooperation
T1K109	19.06.2017	Zheng Xin	China leads the pack
T1K110	19.06.2017	Barbara Finamore	Trump's Paris pact withdrawal puts US last
T1K111	24.06.2017	Zheng Jinran	BRICS pledges environment cooperation
T1K112	10.07.2017	Fu Jing	Paris climate deal is 'irreversible'
T1K113	13.07.2017	N/A	China leads global efforts in clean energy expansion
T1K114	18.07.2017	Fu Jing	Stick to openness while defending Paris Agreement
T1K115	09.08.2017	Zhang Yunfei	Growth and eco-protection not antithetical
T1K116	10.08.2017	Yang Yang	Hubei city rebalances growth with green goals
T1K117	11.08.2017	Chen Weihua	Climate change brings out the ugly, the bad and the good in US
T1K118	19.08.2017	Daniel K. Gardner	What China can teach US about clean air
T1K119	22.08.2017	Jiang Yu	China's development path a success
T1K201	08.06.2017	Zhang Zhihao	Support for green energy to continue
T1K202	22.06.2017	Xing Yi	Residents join anti-littering effort
T1K203	25.07.2017	Zhou Mo	Botanical group told of green planet ambitions
T1K204	01.08.2017	N/A	Local officials need more environmental awareness
T1K205	03.08.2017	An Baijie	New rules fit with Xi's ecology push
T1K206	07.08.2017	An Baijie	Xi: Inner Mongolia makes gains
T1K207	09.08.2017	Chen Jinsong	Confidence in culture vital to renaissance
T1K208	12.08.2017	Zhang Xixian	New thinking meets needs of the times
T1K209	16.08.2017	Huo Yan	Tree planting project turns barren, windy land into oasis
T1K210	29.08.2017	Zhang Yu, Zheng Jinran	Xi notes green push as desert becomes forest
T1K211	30.08.2017	An Baijie	No letup in fulfillment of reforms

³² T = Timeframe; K = Keyword

Timeframe 2 (22.09.2021 - 22.12.2021)

Abbreviation	Date	Author	Title
T2K101	22.09.2020	Kang Bing	Complaints about environment will prompt govt to build greener China
T2K102	24.09.2020	May Zhou	China reinforces pivot to climate friendly growth
T2K103	25.09.2020	Bo Leung	China helps shape response to challenges
T2K104	28.09.2020	Wang Yanfei	US badmouthing China betrays its own ugliness
T2K105	28.09.2020	Hou Liqiang	Country's emissions goal lauded by experts
T2K106	29.09.2020	Wang Qian, Xing Yi	Defining and delivering xiaokang
T2K107	12.10.2020	Alexis Hooi, Wang Linyan	Fighting poverty with firm vision and action
T2K108	13.10.2020	Hu Min, Diego Montero	What next after carbon neutrality by 2060?
T2K109	20.10.2020	Kang Bing	Planting trees to build a greener, healthier future
T2K110	23.10.2020	Sha Zukang	Uphold UN in global governance
T2K111	27.10.2020	N/A	Historic progress made in past 5 years
T2K112	29.10.2020	James P. Lynch	Green is China's new development mantra
T2K113	30.10.2020	Cao Desheng	CPC sets course for nation's long-term growth
T2K114	05.11.2020	David Blair	SMART, GREEN LOGISTICS IS KEY TO ECONOMIC UPGRADING
T2K115	05.11.2020	Hu Angang	Peaking emissions before 2030 will help world fight climate change
T2K116	06.11.2020	N/A	US' formal exit from Paris Agreement blow to global solidarity on climate change
T2K117	23.11.2020	Mo Jingxi	President urges efforts in honoring climate pact
T2K118	30.11.2020	David Blair	14th Five-Year Plan's ambitious goals will upgrade industry, lifestyles
T2K119	03.12.2020	Hou Liqiang	Blueprint sets tone for green development
T2K120	17.12.2020	Zheng Yiran	Retailers embracing green wave to further tap younger consumers
T2K121	18.12.2020	Chen Weihua	Climate fight must trump geopolitical rivalry
T2K122	21.12.2020	Hou Liqiang	Nation reaffirms commitment to multilateralism
T2K123	21.12.2020	Guo Lei	New growth drivers crucial to development
T2K124	22.12.2020	N/A	Energy in China's New Era
T2K201	26.09.2020	Xu Lin	Vision China: Yellow River culture seen as crucial in development of civilization
T2K202	26.09.2020	Xing Wen	Analyst hails global benefit of 'Chinese renaissance'
T2K203	28.09.2020	Yang Wanli	National parks to reinforce 'beautiful China' program
T2K204	01.10.2020	Mo Jingxi	Xi urges greater global green efforts
T2K205	02.10.2020	Liu Yimeng	Global experts laud Xi's plan on biodiversity
T2K206	03.10.2020	N/A	Kunming prepares to host biodiversity conference
T2K207	03.10.2020	Zhang Yunbi	Xi's remarks to UN project 'broad vision'
T2K208	05.10.2020	N/A	'Xiplomacy' echoes call of the times
T2K209	17.10.2020	N/A	Holding high banner of biodiversity
T2K210	29.10.2020	Laurence Brahm	Planning for the future in five-year cycles
T2K211	30.10.2020	Asit K. Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada	If China sets an eco-target, it reaches it
T2K212	30.10.2020	Hou Liqiang	Far-reaching measures to foster green production, lifestyles
T2K213	02.11.2020	OP Rana	Green path is the only way to the future

T2K214	04.11.2020	Hou Liqing	Progress in protection of environment touted
T2K215	11.11.2020	Dong Yifan	China and EU set to improve global climate governance
T2K216	16.11.2020	Wu Shunze	Biodiversity protection focus of overall development plan
T2K217	18.11.2020	Cao Yin	President: Country to stay on path of rule of law
T2K218	30.11.2020	Yang Wanli	County sets green development example
T2K219	30.11.2020	Wang Huiyao	CPTPP marks a higher level of free trade
T2K220	30.11.2020	N/A	Solid step toward ecological civilization
T2K221	01.12.2020	Yang Feiyue	Miyun sets sites on new visitor targets
T2K222	02.12.2020	Ma Zhiping	Hainan leads in banning non-biodegradable plastic
T2K223	08.12.2020	N/A	Policy Digest
T2K224	17.12.2020	Qin Jize, Cao Desheng and Hu Meidong	Xi's vision drives nation's fresh green philosophy
T2K225	18.12.2020	N/A	Border province steps up biodiversity protection

Appendix 2: List of coding categories

Categories	Explanation
<p>1. GEG Affairs</p> <p>1.1. International Community</p> <p>1.1.1. US</p> <p>1.1.2. EU</p>	<p>This category includes statements made by the members of the international community, mostly the US or the EU, on general matters related to GEG.</p>
<p>2. China's Stances on GEG Affairs</p> <p>2.1. US' Actions</p> <p>2.2. Geopolitical Rivalry</p> <p>2.3. China's Role in GEG</p> <p>2.4. Environmental Responsibility</p> <p>2.4.1. Present</p> <p>2.4.2. Historical</p>	<p>This category consists of statements expressing the Chinese perspective on different matters related to GEG.</p>
<p>3. China's Environmental Actions</p>	<p>This category contains statements referring to China's environmental actions, commitments, or achievements.</p>
<p>4. Philosophical and Conceptual Foundation</p> <p>4.1. Ecological Civilization</p> <p>4.2. Application Examples</p> <p>4.3. History and Cultural Heritage</p>	<p>This category comprises statements elaborating on a specific philosophical body of thought or rhetoric behind China's environmental actions.</p>