China's Age of Ascendency: Ecological Civilisation or Ecological Crisis?

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Since the beginning of the ‘Reform and Opening up’ era in 1979, rapid industrialisation, extensive land development and full-scale urbanization have been a priority of the Chinese Government’s economic policy. In November 2012, however, the official acknowledgment, in former President Hu Jintao’s words, that ‘unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable development remains a big problem’, raised some serious questions about the Chinese society’s continuous experience of unprecedented ecological pressures and environmental constraints. In the last few years, the political discourse has been dominated by a growing emphasis on the importance of re- balancing the economy, promoting sustainable growth, and accepting the ‘new normal’: a vision of a qualitatively different development pattern within the context of a softer (and perhaps more sustainable) pace of growth. Top political leaders, from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, have emphasized the importance of ‘ecological civilisation construction’. At the 18th Party Congress (8-12 November 2012), this concept was enshrined into the Party’s Constitution, and then it was progressively incorporated into the Xi Jinping’s metanarrative of the China Dream of national greatness, prosperity and strength.

In this context, I intend to analyse the historical, political and discursive dimensions of the contribution offered by a few selected Chinese intellectuals to the current debate on the importance of ‘ecological civilisation construction’. The final aim of this paper is two-fold: 1.) to offer a more nuanced analysis of the Chinese Government’s imperative to ‘Advance Ecological Civilisation and Build a Beautiful China’; and 2.) to evaluate, from a historical perspective, the necessity to move away from a dominant pattern of combining ultra-rapid industrialisation and full-scale urbanisation which has often seemed to prioritise the building of grandiose cities of spectacle as opposed to liveable cities where human beings want to live. Specific reference will be made to the deadly blasts, which on 12th August 2015 ripped through the hazardous chemicals warehouse of the Ruihai Logistics International Ltd in the Tianjin-Binhai area –known in Chinese as: 天津港“8·12” 特别重大火灾爆炸事故 .