

ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION AND BELT ROAD INITIATIVE: A CASE STUDY

Civilização ecológica e iniciativa do cinturão e rota: um estudo de caso

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Abstract

This paper relies on the inductive method to unveil the specificities of the concept of ecological civilization. China has made efforts to consolidate the principle in the national legal structures and its implications in the international dimension. It aims to connect and track the concept of ecological civilization to the Belt and Road Initiative, thus showing that the idea is projected to the international dimension as a new model of development. In the context of the BRI, the ecological civilization is associated with sustainable development, greening development, the interaction between natural and social worlds, and the coupling of nature and humankind. The analysis demonstrates the implications of the ecological civilization principle in the international governance of the environment thru the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: China. Ecological Civilization. Belt Road Initiative. International Governance of the Environment.

Resumo

Este artigo se vale do método indutivo para desvendar as especificidades do conceito de civilização ecológica. A China tem envidado esforços para consolidar o princípio nas estruturas jurídicas nacionais e suas implicações na dimensão internacional. Tem como objetivo conectar e acompanhar o conceito de civilização ecológica à Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota, mostrando, assim, que a ideia se projeta para a dimensão internacional como um novo modelo de desenvolvimento. No contexto da BRI, a civilização ecológica está associada ao desenvolvimento sustentável, ao desenvolvimento verde, à interação entre os mundos natural e social e ao acoplamento da natureza e da humanidade. A análise demonstra as implicações do princípio da civilização ecológica na governança internacional do meio ambiente por meio da Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota.

Palavras-Chave: China. Civilização Ecológica. Iniciativa do Cinturão. Governança Internacional do Meio Ambiente.

INTRODUCTION

The impacts on the environment caused by China's economic growth in the last 3 decades were very high. A direct result of the internal environmental impacts was the switch of the positioning of China in the 2010s on global environmental protection, especially considering the developing countries (LI; SHAPIRO, 2020).

China changed from a posture of defending the right to development, technology

transfer, financing mitigation and adaptation, absolute sovereignty over natural resources, and common but differentiated responsibilities to an approach to generating awareness of the environmental threats the globe is facing, thus, leaving a position of primary obstacle in the debates over the environment to one of the best options to help the international governance of the environment.

That movement started with strict measures in policy to deal with the internal environmental impacts due to the rapid economic expansion, reinforcing domestic structures to face the mounting challenges and pressures over the environment. The most important driver for this change is the concept of an ecological civilization incorporated into political and legal structures to make possible a top-down approach reflected in the good environmental indicators in China.¹

At the international level, the Chinese positioning in the global system as a driving force for dealing with the challenges to the environment gained traction when Xi assumed as head of the state in 2013, presenting a more robust green vision for the development process to meet the needs of the people. A representative stance of this vision was the meeting between the presidents Barak Obama and Xi Jinping in 2014, which brought new life to the negotiations of the Paris Agreement. At that point, the 2 presidents made several promises that motivated other countries since the United States and China represented 40% of the world's emissions.²

At the same time that a greener vision has been established in internal and external dimensions, economic development moved forward at the international level by creating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³ According to the Chinese government, 145 countries have signed the Memorandum of Understanding to join the BRI, reinforcing the Chinese position that the platform got the attention around the world.⁴

¹ We take into consideration the indicators formulated by the United Nations. In: [United Nations Statistics Division - Environment Statistics](#). Last access: April 05, 2022.

² See the promises In: [Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, U.S.-China Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change, Nov. 12, 2014 | US-China Institute \(usc.edu\)](#). Last access: April 05, 2022.

³ For a summary of the BRI platform: Anwar, A. (2019). *Belt and Road Initiative: What's in it for China?* East-West Center. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25013>; and Cai, P. (2017). *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Lowy Institute for International Policy. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10136>. For a timeline of the platform see [A brief history of the Belt and Road Initiative \(chinadaily.com.cn\)](#). Last access: April 05, 2022.

⁴ See [Belt and Road Portal \(yidaiyilu.gov.cn\)](#). Last access: April 05, 2022.

The platform was launched in 2013 by president Xi reflecting Hu Jintao's "Go West" policy⁵. It possesses five significant goals related to the cooperation with the participating countries: 1) Policy coordination; 2) Facilities connectivity; 3) Unimpeded trade; 4) Financial integration; 5) People-to-people bonds.⁶

Since its inception, the BRI has been suffering severe critics on two fronts: one it is that there is a lack of transparency in the projects that led to several cases of corruption in the countries recipient of the investments,⁷ and two, the absence of governance structures to oversee environmental and labor standards.

Considering the magnitude of the goals and complexity of the BRI, it is very likely that some challenges would emerge as part of building the foundations. However, the most critical aspect is how China has worked internally and with its partners to raise the standards to improve the project's sustainability in all aspects.

In light of the facts and arguments laid down so far in this study, this paper aims to connect and track the concept of ecological civilization to the BRI, thus showing that the idea is projected to the international dimension as a new model of development.

To reach the outlined goal in the last paragraph, this paper relies on the inductive method to unveil the specificities of the concept of ecological civilization and its implications in the international dimension.

The boundaries of the case study are the hermeneutical units related to the concept of ecological civilization within the BRI. The platform has ontological and epistemological stances indicating the potential degree of cooperation and mutual assistance layers among its members under a greener paradigm that is compatible and complementary to the U.N. Agenda 2030.

⁵ See [Communique of the Fifth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China - \(mofcom.gov.cn\)](http://mofcom.gov.cn). Last access: April 05, 2022.

⁶ See The Report of the National Development and Reform Commission, 2015 in [National Development and Reform Commission \(NDRC\) People's Republic of China](http://www.ndrc.gov.cn). Last access: April 05, 2022.

⁷ This paper will not focus the analysis regarding the critics over corruption practices. However, we offer some evidence that this is issue that concerns China as well: "Working together for a clean Silk Road through consultation, contribution and shared benefits, and safeguarding the development of the Belt and Road Initiative in the spirit of the *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*, in accordance with the existing international rules and legal frameworks, on the basis of respecting state sovereignty, cultural differences and national actualities, and in the light of the Silk Road's spirits of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit." Beijing Initiative for the Clean Silk Road uttered by President Xi. In [Full text: Beijing Initiative for the Clean Silk Road - World - Chinadaily.com.cn](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn). Last access: April 05, 2022.

To systematize the case study and its analytical boundaries, we adopt content analysis as the research technique proposed by Bardin (2011).⁸ For the author, content analysis is "[...] a set of communication analysis techniques aimed at obtaining, by procedures, systematic and objective description of the message content, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/reception [...] of these messages." (BARDIN, 2011, p. 37).

The content analysis is justified by the research object that seeks to understand the correlations of the ecological civilization with terms and concepts in documents and literature related to the BRI. The content analysis aims to identify perceptions and intentionality projected by China in its cooperative relations with BRI members.

In Foulcotian terms, it is to apply an analytical mechanism to observe the existence of subjective elements that transit between the mind, the words, and actions that builds a posture that indicates ideational factors in behavior (FOUCAULT, 2014). As stated by Jervis (2017, p.3), the subjectivity of perception refers to the

[...] reality in patterns that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand. We can find both misperceptions that are common to diverse kinds of people and important differences in perceptions that can be explained without delving too deeply into individuals' psyches. This knowledge can be used not only to explain specific decisions but also to account for patterns of interaction and to improve our general understanding of international relations.

The construction of inferences permeates the logical process. The analyzed and coded terms go through an interpretation procedure to determine the surrounding aspects, especially the connections with other words that build the understanding. As Bardin (2011, p.47) clarifies:

[...] what one seeks to establish when conducting an analysis consciously or not is a correspondence between semantic or linguistic structures and the psychological or sociological structures (e.g., behaviors, ideologies, and attitudes) of utterances. In a rather metaphorical way, one will speak of a synchronic plane or horizontal plane to designate the text and its descriptive analysis and a diachronic plane or vertical plane, which refers to the inferred variables.

⁸Bardin, L. (2011). *Content Analysis*. Sao Paulo: Edicoes, 70. See also Krippendorff, Klaus. 2018. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Edição: Fourth. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

To accomplish the task of content analysis, we use the online version of the Voyant Tools.⁹ The Voyant application allows us to perform exploratory and content analysis in the corpus, searching for the hermeneutical units' operationalization, correlation, and context. Thus, as the investigation unfolds, we expect the argument to gain traction in the inferences and empirical amplitude and coverage (GIBBS, 2008).

The primary documents that compose the corpus are *Xi Jinping's Speech at the United Nations (2021)*, *The Fourteen Five-Year Plan*, *the Guidelines for Ecological Environmental Protection of Foreign Investment and Cooperation Construction Projects*, and *the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021*.

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THE ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION AND THE BRI

In this part of the paper, we start the two-level analysis by examining the concept of ecological civilization and the intersection with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Ecological Civilization

Since the election of President Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China's President in 2012, he has been promoting the need to incorporate the ecological dimension into the development process. In the meeting of the Political Bureau on May 24, 2013, he uttered: "We must raise awareness of the need to respect, protect, and accommodate ourselves to nature, follow the basic state policy of resource conservation and environmental protection, and give high priority to conserving, protecting the environment and promoting its natural restoration." (Jinping 2015, p.239)

One of the significant changes related to the environmental dimension was the amendment of the Chinese Constitution in 2018 to incorporate the concept of ecological civilization development.¹⁰ The amendment marks a high degree of concern for environmental issues at the fundamental legal level.¹¹ In the preamble of the Constitution, we

⁹ In <https://voyant-tools.org/>.

¹⁰ Full text in <https://npcobserver.com/2018/03/11/translation-2018-amendment-to-the-p-r-c-constitution/>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

¹¹ The amendment incorporated in the concept in articles 9, 10, 26, and 89 of the Constitution of China. See <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/constitution2019/201911/1f65146fb6104dd3a2793875d19b5b29.shtml>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

read:

[...] promote coordinated material, political, cultural-ethical, social and ecological advancement, in order to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful, and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The ecological civilization means that human beings can benefit from nature and create wealth for nature; in other words, humans must protect nature while transforming nature into harmonious interaction. While gaining economic benefits from harvesting natural resources, humans inevitably cause harm to the environment; thus, the conflict between economic growth in the short term and diseconomy in the long run. The conflict happens when the population, economy, resources, and environment lose optimal balance. Ecological civilization aims to generate a balance in this interaction (Wei et al., 2021; Hansen, Li, and Svarverud, 2018).

As stated by Zhou (2020, p.2):

China's ecological civilization is not only a discourse but also a practical strategy. At the same time, it is also a Marxist response put forward by China in the process of promoting its own economic and social practice. Especially since the 19th Congress of the CPC this response has been concentrated on "harmonious symbiosis between man and nature."

Another empirical instance of the ecological civilization concept is its protection in the Judiciary Branch.

The Supreme People's Court releases an official report on ecological civilization every year to summarize the achievements of judicial assistance to ecology and to raise expectations for future work. According to the China Environmental Justice Development Report (2020), the national judicial system, under the guidance of Xi Jinping's thought on the rule of law and Xi Jinping's thought on ecological civilization, has earnestly implemented "protecting the ecological environment with the strictest system and the strictest rule of law," closely focused on serving the green development strategy, with the "three battles" of winning the battle against pollution, the struggle against epidemics and the battle against poverty as the starting point of environmental justice work. The "three battles" as the starting point of environmental justice work, the construction of a specialized system of environmental justice, ecological resources cases trial quality level has made significant progress, and further laid a distinctive Chinese characteristic of the green judicial concept,

green trial road, green judicial system.¹²

According to the "China Environmental Resources Trial (2020)", the national courts adhere to the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era as a guide, practicing the concept of green water and green mountains to specialize in environmental resources trial as a grasp, to reform and innovation as a driving force, give full play to the role of trial functions, the work has made new progress. In particular, it adheres to the innovation of the institutional mechanism of environmental resources trial, complete and accurate implementation of the new development concept, helping to prevent and control epidemics, promoting continuous improvement of environmental quality, promoting regional governance of critical watersheds, and serving high-quality economic and social development.¹³

The adoption of the concept of ecological civilization and several other initiatives has made China a driver for environmental change in the world. In the article Here's how China is going green, the World Economic Forum points out factors such as clean air, better regulation, green financing, green innovation, and sustainable development zones as drivers for the Chinese leadership in green development.¹⁴

In September 2019, the Supreme People's Court of China, the European Environmental Protection Association, and the Environmental Resources Law Society of the Chinese Law Society cooperated in organizing the International Seminar on Environmental Justice in the New Era of the Green Silk Road. In his keynote speech, Yang Wanming, a Second Class Justice of the People's Republic of China and Vice President of the Supreme People's Court, emphasized that "The Chinese courts will further close international exchanges on

¹²In

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3MjEwNzYzOQ==&mid=2650574909&idx=2&sn=b6468a9f28a9f765booff1c990217c3&chksm=872b6325b05cea3395bbo4924ba11bb611b275cd03coce99f0b956c75901bc9012a0e3b8bbe0&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=0302BzJgKyEgPfUDQqe3FAx&sharer_sharetime=1649646541049&sharer_shareid=ab9183cfecbcbbeb9ec6fa456459393d5#rd. On the WeChat Public "Supreme People's Court" of June 04, 2021. Last access: April 11, 2022.

¹³In

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3MjEwNzYzOQ==&mid=2650574909&idx=1&sn=6ce3a053a126580264043b65e6b8e863&chksm=872b6325b05cea339a741c1b84386943cb63930ab3ac236166acd6ccc6a0b283c008e32efbe&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=03025J3AR3E2AAK0atwT6Wyp&sharer_sharetime=1649646550371&sharer_shareid=ab9183cfecbcbbeb9ec6fa456459393d5#rd. On the WeChat Public "Supreme People's Court" of June 04, 2021. Last access: April 11, 2022.

¹⁴In <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/china-is-going-green-here-s-how/>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

environmental justice, promote practical cooperation in the training of talents, especially in the training of judges and case studies on environmental justice; continue to strengthen mutual learning and appreciation of environmental justice, increase the promotion and display of environmental justice, and provide more 'Chinese wisdom' for the green 'Belt and Road' construction; actively play the role of trial functions, earnestly implement President Xi Jinping's proposal to build a community of human destiny and the 'Belt and Road' initiative, and promote the formation of fair and reasonable judicial solutions."¹⁵

In July 2021, the Supreme People's Court hosted the 2021 Guiyang International Forum on Ecological Civilization, aiming to use the rule of law thinking and methods to provide safeguards for biodiversity conservation and biosafety governance and to promote international exchange and cooperation in scientific research, legal studies and legal practice in the field of biodiversity. The forum further builds a mechanism for environmental judicial information sharing and coordination and cooperation, establishes a platform for diversified sharing of environmental judicial cases and judicial experiences, and forms the Rule of Law Recommendations for Biodiversity Protection, contributing the wisdom of Chinese courts to global biodiversity protection and biosafety governance.¹⁶

In October 2021, the Supreme People's Court hosted the International Forum on Judicial Cooperation along the Maritime Silk Road (Quanzhou), where the participants exchanged views on the theme of "Strengthening Judicial Cooperation to Promote Win-Win Development." The Chief Justice of the People's Republic of China and President of the Supreme People's Court Zhou Qiang attended the opening ceremony of the forum and delivered a speech, expressing his hope to inherit and carry forward the spirit of the Silk Road, deepen judicial exchanges and cooperation among countries along the "Belt and Road," widely build consensus, strengthen exchanges and mutual understanding, and provide effective judicial services for the high-quality construction of the "Belt and Road" and the

¹⁵ In <https://www.court.gov.cn/shenpan-xiangqing-185881.html>. Last access: April 11, 2022.

¹⁶In

https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzlwODM3OTlyNQ==&mid=2247490077&idx=1&sn=251fc2199ae71998ac03864100961d48&chksm=9705562ba072df3de5e4aeb994de9ce7c2b88b40bfbbad13ace06b91e700cdf59aodce571227&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=03023jJdOyAnAf26VGsiBq9S&sharer_sharetime=1649646744779&sharer_shareid=ab9183cfecbcbbeb9ec6fa456459393d5#rd. On the WeChat Public "China Environmental Resources Trial" of July 17, 2021. Last access: April 11, 2022.

building of a community of human destiny.¹⁷

To that end, China seeks to simultaneously share development results at the economic level as safeguards humankind's shared values at the social level, therefore pursuing degrees of internal and international environmental security. (Coenen et al. 2021). Corroborating this trend, the *Here's how China is going green* provides the empirical evidence:

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive global programme aimed at improving inter-connectivity between countries, inspired by the ancient Silk Road, seeks to boost trade and economic growth in Asia and beyond. As Vice Premier Liu He said at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos this year, reducing pollution is one of China's main strategic goals as it pursues this initiative, along with preventing major financial risks and alleviating poverty.

Therefore, to speak about the ecological civilization in the context of the BRI, it is to proceed in a Husserlian eidetic reduction of the concept seeking its raw components. It is to seek the indicators so we can trace its ontology. Considering the literature review and the perceptions collected during the data analysis, ecological civilization is associated with sustainable development, greening development, the interaction between natural and social worlds, and the coupling of nature and humankind.

To that end, in the following section, we will proceed with the content analysis of the corpus as described in the methodological consideration made in the introduction of this paper.

Ecological civilization and BRI

In this section, we start looking into the international projection of the ecological civilization concept thru the BRI. As such, understand that the background conditions given in the introduction about the BRI are sufficient to conduct the proposed case study.

At the opening of the 76th General Assembly of the United Nations, President Xi Jinping laid down the visions and plans for China. He vowed a carbon neutrality stance among his commitments during the General Assembly by 2060. A new development model is necessary and is underway in China's plans to reach this goal.¹⁸

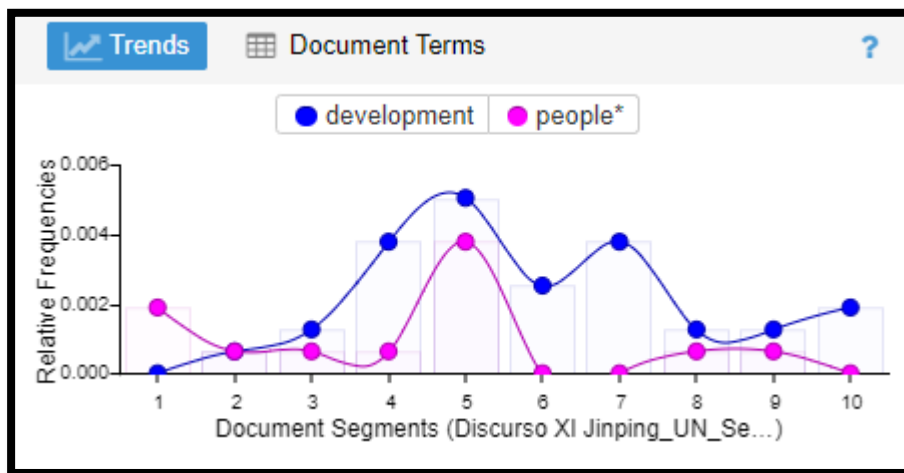
¹⁷ In <https://www.court.gov.cn/shenpan-xiangqing-328421.html>. Last access: April 11, 2022.

¹⁸ The full speech is in <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100642>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

In Figure 1, we observe a high correlation between the terms "development" (34)¹⁹ and "people" (15), which indicates the need to consider the human component of the development model. According to this evidence, it is possible to infer the presence of the ecological civilization principle as a mediator. Other indicators than the pure GDP per capita need to be considered, such as welfare and sustainability (RAMO, 2004). As noted by Pan (2015, p.35), the development model suffered some adjustments, but the ontology remained the same:

For over 2000 years, the Chinese farming civilization followed the philosophy of "harmony between human and nature," complied with the laws of nature, left space for nature to restore itself in economic development, and created several periods of glory in world development history. Despite natural disasters and human mistakes, the Chinese civilization developed continuously and contributed to world civilization development.

Figure 1 - Xi Jinping's Speech at the UN²⁰



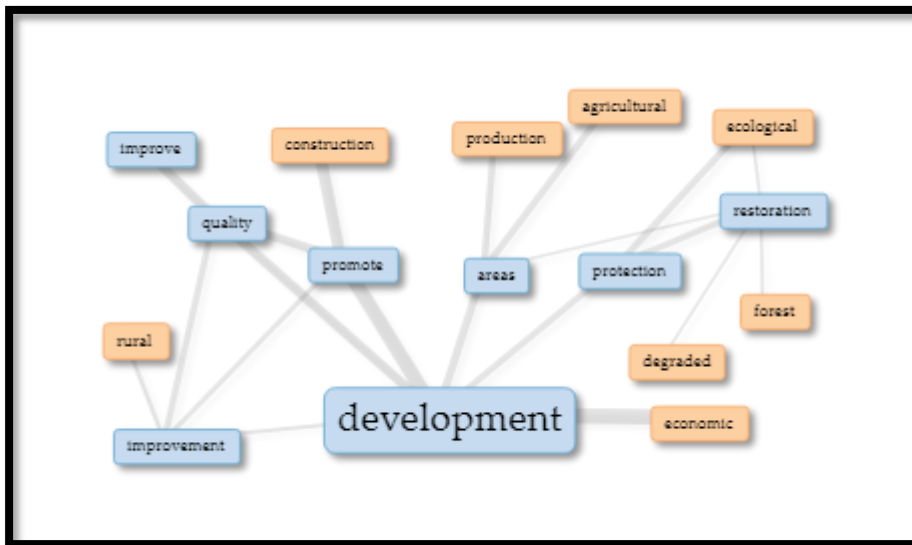
A closer look at this argument at the domestic level confirms the inference.

The Fourteen Five-Year Plan and Vision 2035²¹ presents the goals and objectives that need to be followed by all levels of government in China. It is not the only document to provide guidelines; however, it is the most comprehensive.

¹⁹ The numbers in parenthesis refer to the quantity of usage of the term in the document.

²⁰ Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2022). Voyant Tools. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://voyant-tools.org/?lang=en&panels=cirrus%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=c242e495270c8934d76d9d81cc42971f>.

²¹ The full text is in <https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/translation-14th-five-year-plan-for-national-informatization-dec-2021/>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

Figure 2 - Correlation with Development in the Fourteen Five-Year Plan²²

As we observe in Figure 2, there is a strong correlation between the terms "development" and "economic," which is not a surprise considering that China is in a full-fledged development mode (KROEBER, 2016). However, there is a strong correlation between "development" and other terms associated with ecological civilization, such as "protection" and "restoration" on one side and "promote" and "quality" on the other side.

We find " forest " associated with " protection," which is very important for our argument. For example, China is among the top five countries in the index for decarbonization readiness in land use, forestry, and agriculture according to the Net Zero Readiness Index 2021,²³ which confirms the empirical dimension of the development model under the ecological civilization (WEI Et Al., 2021).

The projection of the ecological civilization to the international realm happens on some Chinese diplomatic fronts; however, the BRI is the most significant in terms of the governance of the environment (COENEN Et Al., 2021; SUN, 2016). The Global Development Policy Center presents an essential background to our analysis:

Since the inception of the BRI, China has made significant strides toward

²² Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2022). *Voyant Tools*. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://voyant-tools.org/?panels=collocatesgraph%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=c58bf072ba8ff5dfeabf2e18a2ab3171>.

²³See the complete report in *Agriculture, land use and forestry - KPMG Global (home.kpmg)*. Last access: April 05, 2022.

greening its overseas activities. The special policy report tracks over 30 documents providing guidance and regulations for outbound investment and finance...This represents an advancement in environmental governance of China's overseas activities, beyond the more general earlier guidance and statements. As China has developed into the world's largest source of bilateral finance, and one of the world's top sources of foreign direct investment, its environmental governance of overseas activities has been spread across many actors: government regulators, project sponsors and financial institutions, among others.²⁴

The investments China made in BRI projects in 2021 sum up to US\$ 59,5 billion. That provides the scale of the platform even considering the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021 provides insights into the realization of the ecological civilization within the BRI:

- a) No coal project received investment;
- b) Increase in financing and investments in green energy; and
- c) Acceleration of green projects.

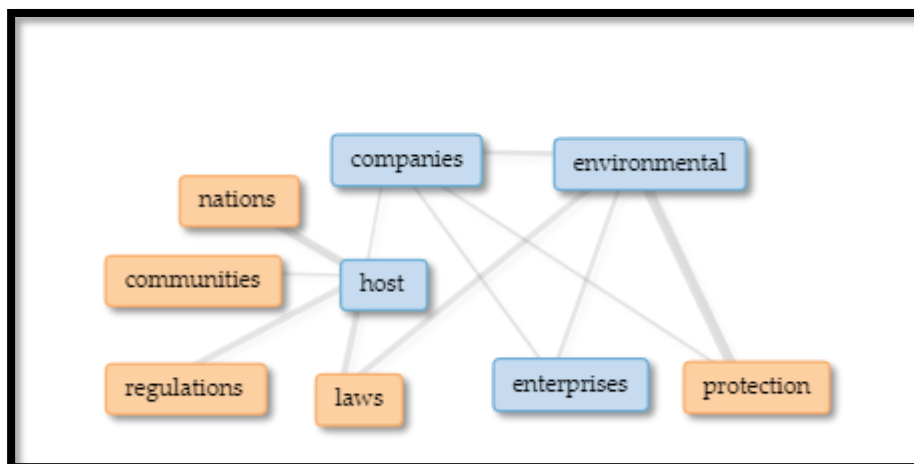
According to the report, the cause for the acceleration of green projects is the *Guidelines for Ecological Environmental Protection of Foreign Investment and Cooperation Construction Projects*, issued in July 2020.²⁵

Figures 3 and 4 point out a high connection between the "environment" and "enterprises" and "companies," which, in the context of foreign investments, for the Chinese government, the bulk of it is related to BRI projects. Considering that many BRI projects are conducted by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the environmental obligations and compliance with local laws in recipient countries seem to be a directive to the government itself as the ultimate responsible party and gatekeeper of the investment's investment allocation (LIN Et Al., 2020).

²⁴ In <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2021/09/15/aligning-the-bri-with-the-sustainable-development-goals-research-and-recommendations/>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

²⁵ The full text is available in <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/policyrelease/bbb/201303/20130300043226.shtml>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

Figure 4 - Correlation of terms_Guidelines for Ecological Environmental Protection of Foreign Investment and Cooperation Construction Projects



The adoption of the guidelines for foreign investments reflects the internal pressure by the central government to accommodate the new model of development that considers higher standards of environmental protection. Tang and Tang (2021) report a representative empirical stance for the higher standards as set in the Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on Green Development²⁷:

[...] the initiative highlights the need to reduce environmental risks through "internationally recognized standards and best practices". This suggests a willingness to require common standards rather than compliance to "host country principle", which requires application of often lower host country environmental standards with negative environmental risk consequences.

In addition, in the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021 (Figure 5), we observe the existence of a strong correlation between "development" and "finance" and "green" (worth mentioning that in this part, we are analyzing the content of a report, which relates word with empirical evidence).

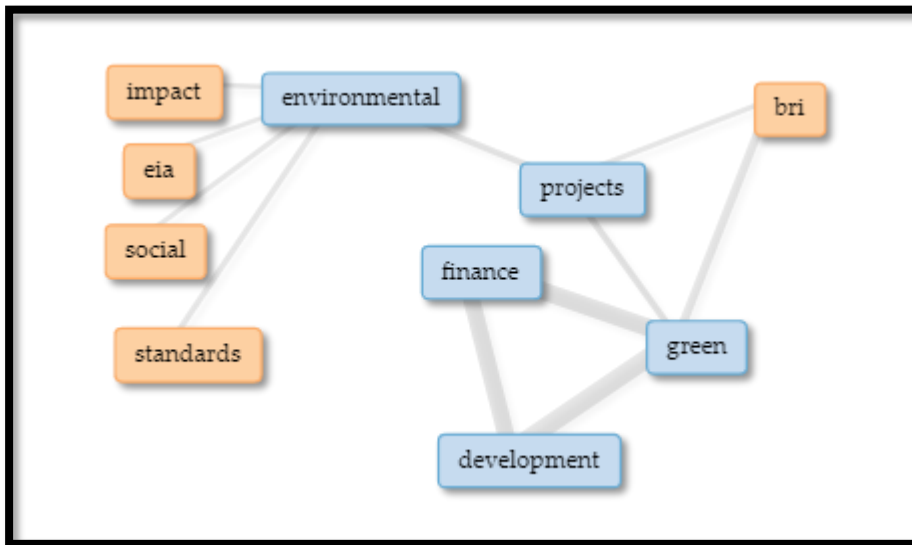
The environmental standards mentioned in the guidelines are manifested in the report as "eia" and impact (this one is connected to the term environmental). The term "eia" refers to the concept of "environmental impact assessment," which, for Glasson and Therivel (2019, p.3)

[...] refers to the need 'to identify and predict the impact on the environment

²⁷ In https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202106/t20210624_9170569.html. Last access: April 05, 2022.

and on man's health and well-being of legislative proposals, policies, programmes, projects and operational procedures, and to interpret and communicate information about the impacts', to the narrow and early U.K. DoE (1989) operational definition: The term 'environmental assessment' describes a technique and a process by which information about the environmental effects of a project is collected, both by the developer and from other sources, and taken into account by the planning authority in forming their judgements on whether the development should go ahead.

Figure 5 - Correlations in the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021²⁸



The recent white paper *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era* presents the most updated vision in the future of the countries' action in terms of development initiatives that incorporate the concept of ecological civilization and community of shared future in the context of the BRI.²⁹ As the document poses:

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road are significant public goods China offers to the whole world and a major platform for international development cooperation. China has joined hands with other countries to promote policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity, to build the Belt and Road into a path

²⁸ Sinclair, S. & G. Rockwell. (2022). *Voyant Tools*. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://voyant-tools.org/?panels=collocatesgraph%2Creader%2Ctrends%2Csummary%2Ccontexts&corpus=48c462e309856869625fb55df8bbbaec>.

²⁹ The full text can be downloaded from http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bbbc6dof72576943922.html. Last access: April 05, 2022.

towards peace, prosperity, opening up, innovation, green development, cultural exchanges, and clean government.

The international projection of the concepts through the BRI is connected to standard terms used in Chinese diplomacy and bilateral agreements, especially with developing countries. There is a predominance of terms that implies the role of values and subjectivities rather than materialistic or vague language to avoid binding commitments. Castro and Denny (2020, p.228), pointing out a constructivist approach to international relations, presented compelling arguments to refute the mainstream perceptions due to China's positioning in the global system, especially some critics within the BRI creation and operation:

Recently, some argue that has been a resurgence of these colonial encounters materialized in the interferences by great powers and international institutions, like a 19th-century colonial power; China has raged the world over to secure the resources needed to meet its ambitions" (MOYO, 2012, p. 108)

Notwithstanding the relations among countries are based on premises disregarded by mainstream research agendas such as association of human beings that share ideas, identities and interests not built by deterministic forces. Therefore, the debate lacks the acknowledgment that "states are real actors to which we can legitimately attribute anthropomorphic qualities like desires, beliefs, and intentionality (WENDT, 1999, p. 197).

Furthermore, the *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era* connects the BRI's projects to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,³⁰ which is a robust stance on the intentions of China to generate more synergy toward a green development model thru the increase of multilateralism, thus, addressing the two prominent critics against the BRI: lack of transparency and lack of environmental standards (JIANG, 2020).³¹

As part of the commitments to a more integrated and green development model under the Agenda 2030:

³⁰ Note that the Agenda 2030 is not the only point to intersection of the BRI with the United Nations multilateral initiatives towards the development. See for instance the *A Study of ICT Connectivity for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Enhancing the Collaboration in China-Central Asia Corridor* made by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). In <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ICT-Connectivity-for-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-China-Central-Asia-Corridor.pdf>. Last access: April 05, 2022.

³¹ There is also a critique regarding the so-called debt-trap as a Chinese policy towards developing countries, which is partially refuted by the arguments and evidence presented in the text. Considering the objective of this paper such argument will not be discussed.

[...] China has proactively assisted other developing countries in promoting new energy, protecting the environment, and addressing climate change. China has shared its experience in green development, fulfilled its commitments under international conventions, and expanded international cooperation on wildlife protection and desertification control, to join other countries in preserving our beautiful planet.

As a result, the core objectives of both the ecological civilization and the Agenda 2030 to harmonize the relationship between man and nature converge to the BRI projects in a holistic way that incorporates ecological, social, economic, and security dimensions of the development process (WEI Et Al., 2021). This convergence presents a viable escape from the post-World War "holly trinity" – liberalization, privatization, and deregulation – that traps many Global South countries in an unsustainable quasi-development process that makes them even more vulnerable to detrimental environmental degradation (KHODAY; PERCH, 2012).

As stated by Khoday and Perch (2012, p. 2-3):

Emerging economies such as China are starting to show leadership in crafting new institutional frameworks for sustainable development in their own countries — models which can be of great benefit to partner countries around the world. Meanwhile many emerging economies are likewise now leading on green economy measures, with most of the world's record US\$386 market capitalisation in the clean technology sector in recent years led by the emerging South and China in particular (PARKER, 2011; WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2011). The prospects of achieving inclusive green growth will increasingly hinge not only on the duties of advanced industrialised nations, but also on the choices made in China and other emerging economies today and in the future. As national efforts to green the economy take shape, so do new institutional frameworks which are created around them and for them.

In this sense, the Special Policy Study Report *Green BRI and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* made by the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED) illustrate this point:

With the communication and dissemination of the concepts of ecological civilization and green development, and the deepening global understanding of the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, green investment has been widely accepted and welcomed by countries all over the world as a new field of sustainable investment. It is thus recommended that China develop a catalogue or taxonomy to clarify the scope and standards of green BRI investment and further engage in the formulation of green investment standards in the host countries and those

at international level (p. 37).³²

Therefore, we conclude our analysis by demonstrating the implications of the ecological civilization principle in the international governance of the environment thru the BRI.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is robust evidence that indicates the projection of the ecological civilization principle to the international arena thru the BRI.

This movement started at the national level. First, there was rhetoric to incorporate the concept in the national legislative bodies to initiate the debates and necessary changes in the legal structure to include it as a provision. It has been made through the amendment of the constitution and other infra-constitutional legislation. The judiciary branch also enacted guidelines for sentencing and other procedural regulation to ensure the enforcement of the principle in court proceedings.

Upon the consolidation of the principle at the national level and the need to address some challenges and critics regarding the BRI projects, the Chinese government initiated the transplant to the international dimension. It was a natural approach considering that China has become an essential agent of transformation in the global environmental governance.

We point out that one of the shortcomings of this paper is that the increase of environmental standards in BRI projects is new. As such, no evidence of the compliance by China or the recipient countries with the legal obligations and standards, which is to be mapped out in the following months and years as the post-pandemic world reignites.

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