

# Five Dialectics of Xi Jinping's Theory on Ecological Progress

Chen Wenbin, Guo Yan\*

**Abstract:** Xi Jinping's theory on ecological progress expands and deepens Marx's views on ecology and spells out the five dialectics between economic development and ecological conservation, the will of the nation and the will of the people, Chinese characteristics and global approaches, cultural concepts and institutional design, as well as the community of life and the community of shared future for mankind. It carries significance for our time and is weighted with theoretical value. At this stage, learning and studying the dialectics and value orientation of Xi Jinping's theory on ecological progress offers scientific guidance and value-based directions for China's efforts to promote an ecological civilization.

**Keywords:** Xi Jinping, theory on ecological progress, Marx's views on ecology, dialectics

The ecological progress is a complex and extensive project. Its theory touches upon numerous elements, which are intricately associated with one another. In a constantly changing world, it is both of theoretical value and practical significance to systematically understand and encapsulate those elements and their inherent connections. General Secretary Xi Jinping has paid great attention to ecological conservation since the 18th CPC National Congress. Based on his deep understanding of China's traditional culture for ecological conservation and Marx's view on ecology, as well as his awareness of the reality China faces in building socialism with Chinese characteristics, Xi Jinping developed a series of in-depth

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and far-reaching ideas concerning the prompting of ecological progress. At the core of his theory lies the five dialectics between economic development and ecological conservation, the will of the nation and the will of the people, Chinese characteristics and global approaches, cultural conceptions and institutional design, as well as the community of life and the community of shared future.

### 1. The dialectic between economic development and ecological conservation

Early in the industrial age, people saw the environment merely as a tool, whose role was to supply the resources needed for economic development. As a result, as economic growth gained pace, people were constantly tempted to take resources from nature in large quantities. Ecological conservation and economic development were thus in a “zero-sum game” where pursuit of conservation would inevitably retard development. But economic development was given priority on a global scale, especially in capitalist countries. As the ecological crisis deepened, however, it became clear that measures to mitigate the destruction of the environment must be developed and implemented. Xi Jinping (2007) stressed that “Economic growth doesn’t equal economic development. Economic development is not all about speed and can’t represent the development in all aspects. We should never pursue economic development at the cost of the environment” (p. 44). Ecological conservation should always guide economic development, as any economic value created at the cost of the environment would be subject to volatility and lead nowhere. Economic growth is by no means the decisive factor for social development. As put by Engels (2009) “. . . If somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms

the proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase” (p. 591).

Xi Jinping’s ideas on ecological conservation are the result of his deep and accurate understanding of the dialectic between economic development and ecological conservation, the core of which is his explanation with the analogy of “mountains”. He insists that “We would rather have lucid waters and lush mountains than mountains of gold and silver;” and he rightly points out that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.” The cognitive process from “we would rather give up the pursuit of money than pollute the environment” to “exchanging lucid waters and lush mountains for mountains of gold and silver” to “we need lucid waters and lush mountains as well as mountains of gold and silver” is both an application of Marxism and a negation of Western countries’ “pollute first, clean up later” approach. Based on his deep understanding of the relationship between mankind and nature and the decisive factors for economic development, Xi Jinping (2014a) pointed out that “Protecting the environment equates to protecting our productive forces and improving the environment also equates to developing productive forces” (p. 209). From the perspective of the productive forces of the society, the environment is at the same time the basis for the survival and growth of laborers and the natural supplier of the subject of labor. The quality of the environment has an immediate impact on the physical conditions and working efficiency of laborers and the value of the products made from the subject of labor. Efforts to boost ecological productivity can be understood as human activities that stress environmental protection and ecological balance and aim to promote a harmonious coexistence between man and nature and the sustainable development of society. The green development theory of “digging for gold in the green economy” calls for optimizing the ecological forces

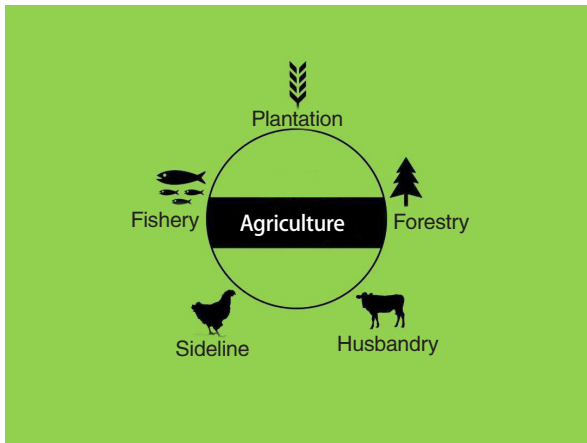
of production, while protecting and improving the environment means boosting ecological productivity by supporting economic development with quality labor as well as advanced instruments of labor and technologies. In this sense, a healthy environment is not only the basis and precondition for the improvement of forces, it is an approach and driving force for green economic development. On top of the green development theory of “digging for gold in the green economy”, Xi Jinping proposed promoting ecological conservation and consequently improving productive forces by adjusting the economic structure and advocating technological innovation. Xi Jinping attaches particular importance to the role of technology in resource development, noting on multiple occasions that we should empower agriculture with technology and leverage technology to exploit untapped resources or expand the use of resources already being exploited. The essence is promoting economic development by optimizing the ecological forces of production and the implements of labor. Therefore, the relationship between economic development and ecological conservation can be of mutual presupposition and restriction. Under certain circumstances, economic development provides the material basis for the improvement of the environment, and a healthy environment paves the way for real sustainable development of the economy.

## 2. The dialectic between the will of the nation and the will of the people

The will of the nation can be seen as the will of the government, while the will of the people can be that of a particular social group or the common will of the entire society. The dialectic between the will of the nation and the will of the people is primarily reflected in the contradiction between the interests of the nation and those of the people. According to Marx’s theory of the state, the state exhibits at the

same time a distinct class nature and the common nature of all class societies, which is the contradiction between the state and the society. The common interests represented by the state are intrinsically at odds with the specific interests of individuals. In a class society, the state usually represents the common interests of the ruling class, which are in fact the specific interests of a selected group of people. In a capitalist society, the state promises to protect the private property of individuals but is mostly protecting what the big capitalists and interest groups have and legitimizing and institutionalizing their right to continue accumulating capital. That is why Marx argued that the state is the product of the irreconcilability of class contradictions.

There is always a way to unite the opposites, and the way to unite the will of the nation and that of the people is the building of a proletarian country and people’s democracy. In a communist society, the interests of the ruling class represented by the state is also the common interests of the proletariat, and what the society represents is the general interests of the public. China is a socialist country characterized by people’s democratic dictatorship and the Chinese Communist Party is the representation of the working class and the Chinese nation and people. As a result, China has always adopted a people-centered approach, and the Chinese Communist Party has been committed to serving the public good and exercising power in the interests of the people. Its primary task at the current stage is improving the public wellbeing, which calls for focusing on the most pressing, most immediate issues that concern people. And, as put by Xi Jinping (2016) “While people longed for adequate food and clothing in the past, they want environmental protection today; while what they cared about was survival in the past, they emphasize ecological conservation today”(p. 233). Since expanding pollution posed a serious threat to people’s living environment and



*sustainable agricultural development*

physical health, a healthy environment is now no longer just a plus. It has become an integral part of people's definition of a decent life. This means that the handling of environmental issues has a direct impact on the people's evaluation and recognition of the government and Party's ability to govern. The inclusion of ecological progress – the issue that the people are most concerned about – in the nation's basic policies and the Party's work guidelines thus becomes a perfect testament to the superiority of socialist and a demonstration of unity between the will of the nation and that of the people. From the social equity point of view, Xi Jinping (2014a) further noted that the promoting of ecological progress will have a profound impact on the future of our nation. "Our efforts for ecological conservation and environmental will benefit future" (p. 208). Therefore, promoting ecological conservation is not only in the fundamental interests of the contemporary generation. It also concerns the common interests of future generations. This again brings to the fore opposition between the will of the nation and that of the people and presents new requirements and tasks for the Communist Party of China. The grander the mission and targets, the more important it is to raise our risk awareness and ensure strict Party self-

discipline. According to Xi Jinping (2016), "Just as we should keep the environment clean, we should also keep our politics clean. Achieving that calls for severe punishments for corrupt officials because our politics will never be clean as long as there is still tolerance for corruption within the Party." In his view, a clean and healthy political environment contributes to the building of socialism with Chinese characteristics. "Environment is productive forces", a clean political environment is an important political precondition for boosting social productive forces.

### 3. The dialectic between Chinese characteristics and global approaches

The environment is an all-encompassing concept and one that concerns the public, and the ecological crisis is a threat facing the entire human race. In the context of a global ecosystem, no individual or country can shirk their responsibility toward the environment. Resolving the ecological crisis and building an ecological civilization are common goals for all countries and people in the world. To achieve them, all countries are obliged to actively exercise their responsibility and share their proven experience in environmental protection while strengthening international cooperation. As Xi Jinping (2014a) put it, "Protecting the environment, addressing climate change and securing energy and resources is a common challenge for the whole world. China will continue to assume its due international obligations, carry out in-depth exchanges and cooperation with all countries in promoting ecological progress, and work with them to promote the sharing of the best practices and make the earth an environmental friendly homeland" (p. 212).

In promoting ecological conservation, the international community shares the common goal of ensuring the sustainable development of mankind,

although countries differ on the exact theory, principle, task, values and approach. Regarding the theory, the view that China has a splendid traditional culture for ecological conservation has left an indelible imprint on Xi Jinping's theory on ecological conservation. He pointed out that China's brilliant culture is a notable advantage of the Chinese nation and we can only open up the future when we keep history in mind (Xi, 2016, pp. 201-202). In the Accelerating Progress in Ecological Systems Opinions on Further Promoting Development of an Ecological Civilization, the CPC central committee advocated tapping brilliant ideas and resources associated with China's traditional ecological culture, creating related cultural works and establishing educational bases, and called on the public to contribute to the ecological progress. Xi Jinping's theory on ecological conservation is deeply rooted in the ecologically enlightened culture created by our ancestors and thousands of years ecological conservation practice, with the aim of addressing the ecological issues at different stages of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is built on practical experience, tested through implementation, and backed by the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics. With respect to the approach to building ecological progress, Xi Jinping's theory on ecological conservation steers China away from the "pollute first, clean up later" path and the "blaming others and shirking responsibility" practice of Western or developed countries. In the three decades of rapid growth, China has confronted with such problems as resource and energy shortages and limited environment carrying capacity. The surfacing of numerous complicated environmental issues has limited China's growth prospects and impetus. Against this background, Xi Jinping (2016) pointed out that "China is a major developing country. To build China into a modern country, instead of walking down the old path of 'pollute

first, clean up later', we must work out a new model for environmental protection"(p. 235). From the standpoint of international cooperation, Xi Jinping (2015) noted that "for global issues like climate change, a take-more-give-less approach based on expediency is in nobody's interest". We should "reject the narrow-minded mentality of the 'zero sum game' and call on all countries, the developed countries in particular, to assume more shared responsibilities for win-win outcomes."

Xi Jinping's theory on, and China's path towards, building an ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics reflect China's specific conditions, while attaining the common goal of untangling the global ecological dilemma requires China's path to be reviewed at an international level. China should draw lessons from other countries' proven thoughts and experience while advancing along its own distinctive path towards ecological civilization. "All the real, exhaustive knowledge is that we raise something else from individual to particularity in our mind, and then from particularity to universality" (Engels, 1971, p. 204). This provides a solid theoretical foundation for the necessity that China should tap proactively into both China's time-honored thoughts on ecology and the proven ideas and approaches of the international community in our efforts to promote ecological progress and to build sustainable economy. "Chinese communists are neither historical nihilists, nor cultural nihilists. We always believe that the basic principles of Marxism must be closely married to the concrete reality of China, and that we should approach traditional native culture and cultures of all countries in a scientific manner, and arm ourselves with all outstanding cultural achievements human have created" (Xi, 2014b). "Facing global challenges, countries need to increase dialogue. We should draw on each other's strengths to achieve common development through mutual learning and deliver benefits to all our people. At the same time,



we should be prepared to accept harmony without uniformity, allowing individual countries to seek their own solutions that best suit their respective national conditions,” said Xi Jinping (2015b).

China must draw lessons from the international community and will, at the same time, enrich and complement the international community’s efforts to promote ecological progress while it presses ahead along its own path to build an ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics. As demonstrated above, the key to effectively address the global ecological crisis and the ecological dilemma resides in an in-depth understanding of, and the ability to reconcile, the dialectical relationship between an individual case and the universal one.

#### 4. The dialectic between cultural concepts and institutional design

The modern ecological crisis can be traced back to the misguided cultural concepts about social development during the early period of the industrial civilization. Humankind, in its long search for an effective solution that could fundamentally untangle the ecological dilemma, has gradually come to realize that “to fundamentally untangle the dilemma requires more than intermittent tinkering with the institutional, technological and financial systems, but rather a fundamental change in cultural concepts” (Lei, 2007). This has explained plainly the undisputable need to foster and promote cultural concepts that accord with the development of ecological civilization if we are to address the fundamental contradiction presenting in the course of ecological progress. Xi Jinping (2014a) attaches great importance to the ecological progress and has stressed that “We must raise awareness to respect, protect, and accommodate ourselves to nature, follow nature’s ways and protect nature. We must dedicate ourselves to raising our ecological awareness,

enhancing relevant systems, safeguarding ecological security, and improving the environment. We must preserve our geographical space and streamline our industrial structure, our mode of production, and our way of life in the interest of resource conservation and environmental protection” (p. 209). “Promote ecological progress in every aspects of its effort to achieve economic, political, cultural and social progress” (p. 211). Xi Jinping’s thinking on ecological progress provides an exit for the ecological dilemma facing humankind and a spiritual benchmark for the obsolete thinking on ecological development. His thinking can also be held as the benchmark to weigh the value of nature in the course of ecological progress. Specifically, Xi Jinping’s thinking on ecological progress has basically established the guiding principle for all aspects concerning the ecological progress.

Cultural concepts and institutional designs are two integral elements in promoting ecological progress. In Xi’s view, “Both external rules and internal consciousness play a part in attaining goals and ensuring observance of rules for a society” (Xi, 2007, p. 13). Institutional systems are necessary means to reinforce internal consciousness. A sound and effective institutional system reflects and further enhances cultural concepts. And man’s attitude towards handling man-nature relationships while seeking social development can be fully represented by the view that “we would rather have lucid waters and lush mountains than mountains of gold and silver” and “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.” A sound and scientific institutional system, as Xi Jinping (2014a) put it, is essential for advancing ecological progress. “We must have the strictest possible institutions and legislation in place in order to guarantee ecological progress”, “we will establish an accountability system, and call to account officials whose ill-judged decisions have caused serious ecological damage” (p. 210).

Apart from that, Xi Jinping also promoted strict observance of the ecological “red line”. Xi Jinping (2016) said that the ecological red line serves as both a bottom line and a lifeline in safeguarding national ecological safety and crossing the red line would engender detrimental results for ecological safety, production and people’s lives and national sustainable development (p. 236). In light of this guideline, China introduced a wide-ranging set of systems regarding property rights assessments, inspections, transactions and evaluations of, access to and compensation for ecological resources. These systems together form an ecological red line system in which the “base line” for safeguarding the ecological functions, the “bottom line” for ensuring the environmental quality and safety and the “upper limit” for utilizing natural resources are clearly drawn. The ecological “red line” system undoubtedly provides a strong institutional assurance for safeguarding China’s ecological safety in an all-round way.

## 5. The dialectic between a community of life and a community of shared future

The relation between a community of life and a community of shared future, viewed from the perspective of ecology, mirrors the dialectical relationship between the whole and its parts. “Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is endowed with natural powers, vital powers—he is an active natural being while as a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants,” wrote Marx (2014, p. 103). Marx also pointed out that man’s relations with all other objects in the natural world are present among all objects. This universal relationship can be identified among all other beings in the natural world. To illustrate this point, Marx (2014) cited the relations

between the sun and plants: “The sun is the object of the plant – an indispensable object to it, confirming its life – just as the plant is an object to the sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun, of the sun’s objective essential power” (p. 103). The idea of a community of life thus embraces both man’s relations with all other natural beings and the mutual relations among all other natural beings. If we regard a community of life as a collective unity of natural beings, a community of shared future is then a part within that larger community. From the perspective of ethics, a community of life and a community of shared future bear different ethical values and denote different moral relationships in different ethical senses. Nonetheless, the mutual relations between the two can essentially be translated into the mutual relation between man and nature in a community of life and that between individuals in a community of shared future. From the view of Marxist, the mutual relations between people are established through their interaction with nature through labor, and the social relations between people established through production and transaction will in turn change man’s relationship with nature. “Man’s relation to nature is directly his relation to man, and his relation to man is directly his relation to nature,” wrote Marx (2014, p. 77). Hence, to “resolve the antagonism between man and nature” means to “reconcile man’s relationship with itself.” To fundamentally resolve the antagonism between man and nature, we must thus reform our social systems. The grand vision of building socialism with Chinese characteristics is a proposition that has laid the political foundation for fundamentally resolving the antagonism between man and nature and updating the social relations between men. Introduced with a view to the interests of both the ecosystem and the people, Xi Jinping’s theory on ecological progress is a vivid expression of the concepts of a community of life and a community of shared future. Xi Jinping

(2014a) pointed out that “mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands and lakes form a living community. The lifeline of the people comes from the farmland, the farmland comes from the water, the water comes from the mountain, the mountain comes from the earth, the earth comes from the tree” (p. 85). Nature and man belong to one single ecosystem in which all its parts depend upon and influence each other. As Xi Jinping put it, a community of shared future in which the interests of all countries have become intertwined has already taken shape. As Xi Jinping (2013) said “People today face many prominent problems, such as the persistently widening gap between the poor and the rich, the excessive splurge on materials, rampant individualism, diminishing social integrity, deteriorating ethics and morality and the intense relations between man and nature. To tackle these problems, the wisdom and strength acquired today alone are not enough, we must also draw on the wisdom and strength accumulated in history.” The wisdom and strength accumulated in history, in this case, refers to the precious element in Chinese traditional culture, “Harmony”. The harmony between men is conducive to the harmony between man and nature. Accordingly, the harmony between nations promotes harmony in the entire world. This explains why the ecological problems and other challenges facing all human beings can be better addressed by creating a community of shared future. The holistic nature of the concepts of a community of life and a community of shared future reveals that “the relations between man and nature are the most fundamental relationship in human society.” “Mankind may utilize nature and even try to transform it, but we are ultimately a part of nature. We should care for nature and not place ourselves

above it” (Xi, 2016, p. 231). Therefore, we should properly handle the challenging relationship between “economic development and the limited supply of natural resources” (Xi, 2007). China’s resolve to fundamentally address the antagonism between man and nature is fully evidenced in its determination to forge ahead on the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics, promote the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and uphold the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. And these efforts, in turn, lay a solid political foundation for fostering harmonious social relations between people.

Ecological civilization construction is an integral element in the overall plan for building socialism with Chinese characteristics. The five dialectics between economic development and ecological conservation, the will of the nation and the will of the people, Chinese characteristics and global approaches, cultural conceptions and institutional design, as well as a community of life and a community of shared future represent the theoretical foundation, as well as China’s stance and approach toward promoting ecological progress in the course of economic development, political development, ecological construction, cultural development and social construction in China and beyond. The dialectical nature of Xi Jinping’s theory on ecological progress provides the scientific guideline and the value orientation for promoting ecological progress. A thorough study of this can help us better resolve the fundamental contradictions concerning ecological progress and provide insights into the pattern and progress of ecological progress.

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