

Four Basic Dimensions and Contemporary Significance of Xi Jinping's Ecological Concept

Luo Huijun & Xu Mingjian*

Abstract: Faced with increasingly severe ecological pollution and environmental degradation, Xi Jinping has put forward the scientific thoughts on ecological civilization construction and environmental protection. Xi Jinping's ecological concept is an important part of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. This has come into being under a particular historical background and a certain theoretical basis, and comprises four dimensions; ecological concepts of civilization, economy, security and livelihood. Xi Jinping's ecological concept is conducive not only to the construction of a harmonious socialist society and building a beautiful China, but also to the realization of the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and creating a community of shared future for mankind.

Keywords: Xi Jinping; ecological civilization; ecological economy; ecological security; ecological livelihood

Ecological concept is an important part of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. In face of the ecological damage, environmental degradation and other problems as a result of economic development, Xi Jinping has extensively drawn on the achievements of ecological theory, kept a foothold on the practice in building socialism with Chinese characteristics, and focused on the people's requirements for a healthy ecological environment. On several occasions, he has discussed the idea of ecological development with Chinese characteristics from multiple dimensions, proposing an ecological philosophy comprising the concepts of ecological civilization, economy,

* Luo Huijun, professor, School of Marxism, Central South University.

Xu Mingjian, School of Marxism, Central South University.

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security and livelihood. Xi Jinping's ecological thoughts can be deemed as the inheritance and development of a Marxist ecological concept, and a Chinese solution to building an ecological civilization in a new era.

1. Ecological civilization concept shaping the harmony between man and nature

Since the 18th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping has constantly enriched and developed the ecological civilization concept and gradually introduced a series of new ideas and viewpoints. By adhering to Marxist ecological concept and correctly grasping the ecological situation in China, he has created a grand ecological blueprint featuring harmony between man and man, and man and nature.

Xi Jinping has inherited the basic connotation of the Marxist ecological concept, namely, an ecological civilization is the development direction and objective of human civilization. Marx pointed out that man and nature were interrelated as an object to each other. Human sees the natural world as its object, and vice versa. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx emphasized: "Humans are born in nature and are the product of the long-term development of the natural world."^① On one hand, humans are born out in nature and were children of the natural world. Humans depend on nature to achieve development and join with nature as a community of shared future. On the other hand, humans are also endowed with subjective initiative, so they can conform to the laws of nature

and transform nature based on practice. "As humans have an increasing understanding of the laws of nature, their reaction to the natural world has also been enhanced."^② With a strong ability to transform nature, humans can be a threat to the natural world in some cases because natural resources are limited and cannot endlessly meet all human needs. Marxist ecological concept argues that people shall properly handle the relationship between man and nature when developing productive forces. By inheriting and carrying forward this point of view, Xi Jinping highlighted, "Humans' endless demands for survival and development inevitably contradict with the limited supplies of the earth's resources. An ancient thinker once said, 'It shall take time for nature to produce limited resources, but humans' needs are endless', revealing such a contradiction to some extent."^③ To address this contradiction, we shall follow the objective law of the harmonious co-existence between man and nature during social development and coordinate the relationship between the two, to achieve the comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development of human civilization. Xi Jinping further demonstrated the issue from both positive and negative perspectives. The Chinese nation advocates holism and a flexible mindset, forming an organic agricultural pattern characterized by "mulberry fish pond" and the value of "love for people and nature." Therefore, "the Chinese civilization has always advocated for harmony between man and nature and respect for nature," and that is why only the Chinese culture among the Four Great Ancient Civilizations has survived to this day.^④ However, human civilization may stagnate, break down or even step to the brink

① *Collected works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 27). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1979:63.

② *Collected works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 20). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1971:235.

③ Xi, 2007, p.118

④ Xi, 2015

of extinction as a result of going against the laws of nature. Xi Jinping cited a counter-example from Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*: The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that they were laying the basis for the present devastated condition of these countries. Learning such lessons in history and in the face of modern globalization and cultural diversification, we shall pay more attention to the coordinated relationship between man and nature and shape the harmonious co-existence between them.

Xi Jinping's ecological civilization concept echoes the present ecological conditions of China. Since the adoption of reform and opening-up policy, China has made remarkable achievements in economic development, with its GDP jumping from RMB 54 trillion to RMB 80 trillion. This has made China the second largest economy in the world, attracting worldwide attention.^① However, China's economic growth has mainly followed the extensive development model and China has been increasingly confronted with severe environmental problems, such as resource shortages, environmental degradation, thick haze, and water and soil loss. The area suffering from water and soil loss in China accounts for 30.72% of the total territory. Its desertified land covers an area of 1.73 million square kilometers, while the per capita forest coverage only reaches 23% of the world's average.^② Environmental problems have seriously threatened people's lives and affected sustainable economic development. People have also seen the potential hazards and major risks of "Development = Economic Growth = GDP Growth." Marx pointed out, "Man's relationship with nature is immediately his relationship to man,

just as his relationship to man is immediately his relationship to nature."^③ To this end, Xi Jinping has reflected on China's development model based on the demands for the coordinated development of the economy, society and the ecosystem, and proposed an ecological civilization concept with Chinese characteristics, "A healthy ecosystem will prosper civilization; a deteriorating ecosystem will decay civilization."

2. Ecological economy concept promoting the coordinated development of the economy and ecosystem

The concept of an ecological economy has been introduced to implement and develop the ecological civilization concept. By abandoning the traditional development model, from the economic perspective it has offered a theoretical summary of harmonious development between man and nature as well as that among people. Considering the actual ecological situation in China, Xi Jinping has logically identified the relationship between economic development and ecological management. In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, he has pointed out that our country is still and will long remain in the primary stage of socialism. With the evolution of the principal contradiction facing Chinese society, we shall insist on the central task of economic development, vigorously develop productive forces, and push forward supply-side structural reform. To this end, Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed such ecological economy concept as "protecting ecological environments equates to protecting productive forces while improving ecological environments

① Xi, 2017

② National Ecological Protection and Construction Planning (2013–2020). Retrieved from http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbtz/201411/t20141119_648513.html.

③ *Collected works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 3). Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2002:296.

equates to improving productive forces,” and “we shall pursue favorable environmental and economic benefits equally...lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.”

Xi Jinping’s ecological economy concept is the development of the Marxist ecological concept in contemporary times. Marx perceived natural conditions as natural productivity. In his work *Capital*, Marx pointed out that natural productivity referred to the “productivity of human labor found in the inorganic world” and “the productivity of labor under natural influence.” Natural productivity comprises fertile soil, waters ensuring the survival of fishery resources and other natural resources maintaining human survival and development; also, minerals, waterfalls, rivers, forests and other natural resources providing people with means of labor.^① By inheriting and developing Marx’s viewpoint on natural productivity, Xi Jinping has proposed the scientific thesis. “Protecting ecological environments equates to protecting productive forces, and ecological environments are the productive forces.” Favorable ecological environments are the foundation for human survival and development, and the natural premise for the implementation of national sustainable development strategy. Xi Jinping highlighted, “We shall prefer favorable environments to economic benefits, and lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.”^② This is a classical interpretation of the relationship between environmental protection and productivity development, integrating economic development with ecological protection. Xi Jinping has emphatically commented on economic development, holding the opinion of “focusing on GDP and pursuing green GDP at the same time.” He has attached great importance to the

protection of the ecological environment, so in his evaluation criteria, the performances in resources consumption, environmental pollution and haze management should be included in the evaluation index system. Furthermore, ecological environment is considered an important index for the promotion of cadres and government performance examinations. At the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC, the five development concepts, i.e., “Innovation, Coordination, Green, Open and Sharing” were emphasized, inspiring us to implement the “green” ideas in development. The Report to the 19th CPC National Congress further points out that it is necessary to continuously implement the green development concept, accelerate the establishment of the legal system and policy orientation of green production and consumption, and adhere to the economic system featuring green, low-carbon and cyclic development. We shall continue constructing a green-oriented innovation system of green technology, developing green finance, and strengthening the industries related to energy conservation and environmental protection, clean production, and clean energy.

Xi Jinping’s ecological economy concept embraces the dialectic relationship between economic development and ecological environment protection. It is necessary to focus on economic construction and vigorously develop productive forces by relying on ecological environment systems. The ecological environment systems have supplied people with resources such as fresh water, forests and land, serving as life-supporting systems for human survival and development. If people ignore the carrying capacity of the natural environment by pursuing GDP only and therefore cause the degradation of ecological systems, they will face the

① *Collected works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 44). Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2001:586.

② Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, 2014, p.120.

vengeance of the natural world which will eventually impede the sustained, sound and rapid development of our national economy. During economic development, therefore, people shall minimize the use of non-renewable resources, actively promote the recycling of renewable resources, and promote the ecological balance by using natural resources and protecting the natural ecological environment in a practical and rational way. Productive forces consist of three elements: laborers, instruments and subjects of labor. Man, in the natural world, as an important element of productive forces, is one of the powerful productive forces. China's strategies for rejuvenating the country through science and education, human resource development, and innovation-driven development all aim to promote the quality of life for people. With more efforts to preserve and restore ecological systems, we can create a living environment favorable to people's free and comprehensive development, thereby promoting the development of productive forces. The protection and improvement of ecological environments herein are essentially to develop the economy, promote the stability of the natural foundations for productive forces, and shift the high-speed growth of the national economy to a high-quality growth. Economic development and ecological environment protection are in a dialectic relationship. Xi Jinping pointed out, "We must follow the protection-first guideline, pursuing development through protection and keeping protection in mind during development."^① In economic development, we shall put into practice the scientific outlook on comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development and remain committed to the new development philosophy. Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed that it is important to achieve

economic development under the green development philosophy, establish and improve environmental protection policies, and effectively protect China's ecological environment. Only in this way can we protect both the natural productive forces of ecological development and the economic growth driver, preserving a natural environment with sound ecological conditions for the implementation of a sustainable development strategy.

3. Ecological security concept upholding law-based concept and redline thinking

In a broad sense, national security comprises five important parts; sovereignty security, military security, economic security, citizen security and ecological security. The well-known British Professor Norman Myers believed, "Ecological security is the core of national security." It exerts extensive and far-reaching influence on a country's military affairs, economy, politics, culture and citizen security. Ecological security generally includes two parts: one to overcome the difficulty of maintaining sustainable development due to worse ecological environments; and another to prevent the public indignation and national turmoil aroused by environmental damage and ecological pollution.^② Ecological security also possesses two features: one is globality, namely, affecting any part of the ecological environment may lead to an overall ecological problem and further involving the ecological security of surrounding countries or even the world, just like "pulling one hair and the whole body is affected;" another is long-time recovery. Once the ecological environment is destroyed, its recovery

① Zhou, 2013.

② Zhang, Wu & Yuan, 2007.



will require the maintenance of several, dozens, even tens of generations and consume countless manpower, material and financial resources. Since the reform and opening-up began, China has seen rapid economic growth, but the ecological environment is not optimistic. The aggravation of haze, sand storms and greenhouse effects has spread the ecological problems from local areas to the whole country. The most critical factor behind this phenomenon is the absence of a complete environmental protection system and mechanism. Therefore, to protect the ecological environment, we must uphold a law-based thinking, and manage ecological issues according to law.

Xi Jinping indicated, “Only through establishment of the strictest system and law-based governance can the construction of an ecological civilization be guaranteed in a scientific and reliable way.”^① Therefore, our Party has held firm to the implementation of “scientific legislation, strict enforcement, judicial justice and universal observance of law” in ecological management. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee emphasized that we shall create global thinking, a dedicated spirit and integral consciousness for environmental protection, and those with dereliction of duty or misconduct in ecological management must be held strictly responsible. At the Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, it was reaffirmed to further advance law-based governance, one of the strategic measures in the Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy, and cement the environmental protection and ecological management legally and systematically. At the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, Xi Jinping proposed the new

development philosophy, stressing that it should be imperative to implement the strictest cultivated land protection system and establish a complete environmental management system. At the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, Xi Jinping pointed out the importance of the Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy layout with the advancement of law-based governance included. At the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping highlighted the necessity of establishing the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Ruling the Country by Law, further advancing the construction the rule of law in China and establishing a complete set of legal norms. It was also proposed in the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress that we shall strengthen the establishment of the ecological environment supervision system, carry forward the overall planning and organization of ecological civilization construction, establish the natural resource assets management agency and the natural ecosystem regulatory agency, and further improve the ecological environment management system. Practices have proven that ecological security is a crucial guarantee for economic security, political security, national defense security and military security. To further protect ecological environments, the national government also set up an ecological redline. “We shall have a firm belief in the ecological redline. We must not touch the bottom line regarding ecological management and environmental protections, otherwise we will be punished.”^② Xi Jinping emphasized that we shall “set an upper limit to resources consumption” and “a lower limit to environmental quality,” staying clear of the ecological redline. Only in this way can we bring a safe and harmonious ecological environment to all.

① Xi, 2014, p.210

② Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, 2016.

4. Ecological livelihood concept: A sound ecological environment is concerned with people's livelihoods and well-being.

People's livelihoods and well-being mean not only the satisfaction of material needs, but also the maintenance of ecological environments. A clean and beautiful ecological environment is also an important part of people's livelihoods and well-being.

Attention to the people's ecological livelihood is not only the connotation of Marxism, but also our Party's fine tradition. Our Party has always treated the people's ecological livelihood as one of the key government administrative objectives. During the 1950s to the 1970s, Mao Zedong led

the Chinese people to harness the Huaihe River, build the Guanting and Sanmenxia Reservoirs, the Gezhouba Water Control Project and other major water conservancy projects, striving to bring soil loss under control and laying a solid ecological foundation for people's production and living. Jiang Zeming stressed that, "Environmental problems directly affect people's production, living, physical and mental health." Thus, we should consider environmental protection from the strategic perspective of national development. In the face of increasingly severe ecological problems, Hu Jintao pointed out that we shall take concrete action to address environmental pollution and strengthen ecological civilization construction, ensuring that our people can live in a superior ecological environment. He also proposed the scientific



environmental pollution



outlook on development with basic requirements for “comprehensiveness, coordinateness, and sustainability,” which set up an organic connection between livelihood and ecological issues. The 17th CPC National Congress proposed to “build a resource-saving and environment-friendly society,” aiming to better facilitate the implementation of a sustainable development strategy and achieve continuous social and economic development. Our Party has adhered to the purpose of serving people by basing itself on the people’s actual interests and placing emphasis on the construction of an ecological civilization.

Xi Jinping has inherited and carried forward the fine style and traditional virtues of our Party caring for the people’s needs and highlighting ecological construction. Based on the basic standpoint of historical materialism, Xi Jinping stressed, “A sound ecological environment is the most fair public product and most general welfare for people.”^① His remark provides the clear and scientific standpoint of socialist ecological civilization, and an ecological livelihood concept with characteristics of a new time is formed therefrom. This tells us that we should at first legally remain the public character of natural goods. Natural resources are exclusive wealth for everyone with an attribute of public goods. Everyone has an equal opportunity and right to use natural resources. Industrial revolution has promoted the tremendous growth of human material wealth. However, the relationship between man and nature also sees a contradiction that is difficult to resolve, from which the resultant ecological damage, global warming, environmental pollution, food crisis and other increasingly severe issues have provoked deep thought worldwide. John Bellamy Foster, a well-known American theorist of Marxist

ecology, stressed, “The capitalist economy’s first purpose is to pursue profit growth, so it spares no efforts to achieve economic growth, exploiting and hurting the interests of most people in the world. Such rapid growth will not only consume resources and raw materials quickly, but also discard more and more wastes into the natural world, leading to environmental degradation.”^② If such a worsening ecological environment is under no control, humans will eventually lose the residential qualification on earth or even face extinction. Therefore, developed countries must act in concert to protect the environment, save resources, and promote harmonious development between man and nature. With the increasingly worsening global ecological environment crisis, superior ecological environments have become public resources under the joint efforts of mankind on the basis of natural goods serving as the premise for sustainable human development. In this context, we firmly oppose the behavior of selling natural resources as private goods. Xi Jinping emphasized the necessity of implementing a global governance concept and building a community of man and nature; the second is to remain committed to the political position as the representative for the fundamental interests of the broad masses. Historical socialism requires us to uphold “the working method of doing everything for the masses, carrying out the principle of from the masses, to the masses.” A superior ecological environment can provide people with a good living quality, so ecological civilization construction is an action conforming to the people’s wishes. Xi Jinping has pointed out that our people have yearned for a sound ecological environment, fresh air, and clean drinking water, which require us to urgently address environmental problems. In terms of river pollution, the national

① Literature Research Office of CPC Central Committee, 2014, p.107

② Foster, 2006, p.2

government has introduced the “river chief system,” which is conducive to cleaning local rivers. For the rapidly-spreading pollution of heavy haze and solid wastes such as heavy metals and chemicals, we shall give priority to addressing the issues which people have the greatest concerns; the third is to implement the rural revitalization strategy featuring a pleasant living environment. In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping proposed to implement the rural revitalization strategy according to the general requirements of “thriving businesses, a pleasant living environment, rural civilizations, effective governance and a prosperous life.” Xi Jinping placed a special emphasis on the “a pleasant living environment”, with a focus on the development of the rural ecological economy. We shall give play to the masses’ pioneering spirit, and also stand together with them to lay a solid foundation for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, because a sound ecological environment is the most general welfare for people.

5. Contemporary significance of Xi Jinping’s ecological concept

As an important part of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, Xi Jinping’s ecological concept in a theoretical sense, is not only the development of Marxism in China, but also an innovative theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In a practical sense, Xi Jinping’s ecological concept is of great contemporary significance.

5.1 Inevitable requirement of building a harmonious socialist society

Xi Jinping revealed the important value of ecological civilization construction for social construction. The harmonious coexistence between man and nature is shown in following three aspects: production development, a prosperous life and a

sound ecological environment. The harmonious relationship between man and nature and among people is the important premise for building a harmonious socialist society. As entering a new normal in economic development, China is facing ecological degradation, environmental pollution and other problems in the process of building a harmonious socialist society. However, it is very hard to find existing answers to these problems in Marx’s classical works. We therefore need to conduct research and exploration based on the practical condition by following a case-by-case method. As an important part of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, Xi Jinping’s ecological concepts are also the latest theoretical achievements and the crystallization of the collective wisdom of localized Marxism in China. In the process of building a harmonious socialist society, Xi Jinping’s ecological concept is not only implemented at the institutional level, but carried out and put to good use at the practical level. The Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of Ecological Civilization requires us to respect and protect nature at the institutional level. In the Environmental Protection Law modified at the 8th session of the National People’s Congress in 2015, it is clearly stated for the first time that “economic and social development shall be coordinated with environmental protection.” At the practical level, the national government has investigated a number of environment-polluting enterprises. Ningxia Zhongwei Mingsheng Dyeing Co., Ltd., for instance, has exerted a deterrent effect on society. The management of environment problems such as water and soil loss and smog have also seen gratifying achievements. All of these have played an important role in building a harmonious socialist society.

5.2 Scientific guideline for building a beautiful China

In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping pointed out that it should be important to advance the structural reform of ecological civilization and building a beautiful China, which should be an important manifestation of our Party in carrying out the scientific outlook on development that should put people first in a new era. To build a beautiful China, we need not only to shift the economic development model from high-speed growth to high-quality growth, but also to take a sound ecological environment as the premise and strong foundation for the transformation. Xi Jinping stressed, "It is important to make a reasonable geographic layout for production, living and ecosystems, give enough survival space to nature, and leave the next generations a beautiful home with blue sky, green land and clean water."

Xi Jinping's ecological concept implies the organic unity of natural and social environments and reflects the spiritual essence and specific requirements of building a beautiful China. In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping emphasized that from 2035 to the middle of the 21st century, we should have basically achieved modernization, and work hard for a further 15 years and develop China into a great modern socialist country that should be prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful. As compared with the statement "develop China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious," the additional word "beautiful" indicates Xi Jinping's request for us to promote "balanced economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological progress" and focus



a beautiful home with blue sky, green land and clean water

on building a beautiful China when developing a socialist market economy, constructing socialist democratic politics, pushing forward the great development of socialist culture and building a harmonious socialist society.

5.3 A path to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation

Xi Jinping has explained the Chinese Dream of a prosperous nation, national rejuvenation and people's happiness, which bears the great expectations of over a billion Chinese people, indicating a bright future of the Chinese nation. Every citizen is a participant and builder of the Chinese Dream. The real Chinese Dream needs our concerted efforts, and Xi Jinping's ecological concept is an important manifestation of the Chinese Dream. The harmony and unity between

man and nature lays an important foundation for realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping pointed out that as we entered the new age of socialism with Chinese characteristics, our society's principal contradiction has shifted to people's increasing need for a better life and unbalanced, inadequate development. The Chinese people's basic living have already been resolved. People not only expect more from material and cultural life, but also have increasingly higher requirements for environmental quality today. A sound ecological environment provides a natural foundation for achieving the Chinese Dream. Our Chinese Dream can only be completely realized by first making the ecological dream come true and building a beautiful China. Green development has



already become the common understanding among countries in the world and deeply recognized by all people. We actively respond to this worldwide trend and uphold green development, which is conducive to the ideological construction of ecological civilization and realizing the ecological dream of national rejuvenation.^①

5.4 Urgent demands for building a community of shared future for mankind

The green development concept was started with the thought of natural justice, responding with action for the protection of human's common interests and the balanced rights of diversified social interest subjects.^② In the Report to the 18th CPC National Congress, "A community of shared future for mankind" was brought up to require us to have a global vision and high social responsibility, correctly cope with the major issues in the development of China and beyond, and actively uphold the win-win cooperation mechanism across the world. In face of the alienation of man from nature, ecological management is an environmental guarantee for building a community of shared future for mankind. Xi Jinping emphasized, "Mountains, waters, forests, farmlands and lakes form a community of life. The lifeline of the people comes from the farmland, that of the farmland comes from the water, that of the

water comes from the mountain, that of the mountain comes from the earth, and that of the earth comes from the tree."^③ In the construction of an ecological civilization, we must be aware that mountains, waters, forests, farmlands and lakes form an organic community of life. In the Report to the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping further pointed out that man and nature should form a community of life. People must respect, conform to and protect nature. As China enters the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, it is important to build a community of life not only between man and nature, but also among people. Peace and development are the theme of our times; the realization of the Chinese Dream is closely linked to the interests of all relevant countries. We must steadfastly follow the path of peaceful development and uphold an independent foreign policy of peace. We also need to establish the socialism thoughts of righteousness and benefits, hold firm to the new concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, seek the development prospects of openness, innovation, inclusiveness and reciprocity, and build an ecological system advocating natural and green development. The construction of a sound ecological system remains the urgent need for building a community of shared future for mankind.

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① Pan, 2017.

② Fu, 2017

③ Xi, 2015,p.85

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