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The right to equal aspirations and the obligation to be different, as a basis for a common future

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**The Right to Equal Aspirations and The Obligation to be Different, as a Basis for a
Common Future**
Olivia Bina¹

Abstract

By virtue of its sheer size and growth trajectory, China knows it cannot be ignored. The question is whether it can offer leadership in terms of greater responsibility, both towards its own people and the rest of the world. The climate change crisis is the ultimate expression of unsustainable patterns of growth. Based on this perspective of the climate change debate, I explore the theme of responsibility as traditionally focused around the need to limit emissions, but also in terms of the obligation to pursue development aspirations through a different path. I consider the argument that China's leadership has an opportunity to embark on a path that is consistent with the need to secure a 'common future', and highlight both the promise and contradictions of current policy. I conclude by challenging the idea that there is a significant difference between the position of China's Government and that of most developed nations, and suggest that the promise of a new path for development might still be met if contradictions are finally acknowledged, and experimentation is adopted to pursue bold alternatives, rather than efficient growth models.

*'All this is happening before our eyes, and yet we act as if we had all the time we want,
and all the solutions...
If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it...
I am only a child and yet I know we are all part of a family, 5 billion strong, in fact 30 million
species strong and borders and governments will never change that....
we are all in this together and should act as one single world, towards one single goal...
even when we have more than enough we are afraid to share,
we are afraid to let go of some of our wealth...*

Severn Suzuki speaking at UN Earth Summit 1992

In 1992, as representatives of state met in Rio de Janeiro for the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, the world had enough evidence to know that growth was taking its toll on the planet, and that its benefits were very unevenly distributed. It also knew that dependence on fossil fuels to deliver most of those unevenly distributed benefits (registered as annual GDP growth) was resulting in dangerous concentrations of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Even children knew it (Suzuki 1992: xvii).

Fast-forward almost two decades and little has changed. A staggering amount of information, reports, renewed commitments and a regularly rediscovered urgency with which the 'crises' ought to be addressed, characterised the 1990s and the first decade of this millennium like a relentless, yet muffled, beat. Climate change is emblematic of the extent of our impact, the urgency for a response and the seemingly endless postponement of action. Although it is but the final symptom of a long chain of effects (MEA 2005) caused by humanity's 'continuing transformation of the earth' (Schellnhuber *et al.* 2005: 13) in its

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pursuit of prosperity, climate change stands out as the issue that best illustrates our interdependence, not just between nations but with all species and habitats on whose services we ‘fundamentally depend’ (MEA 2005: v). It is not the quintessentially global dimension of this crisis that has focused the minds of heads of state over the last few years, but rather, its implications given our interdependence: a characteristic of the earth system that globalisation has exacerbated into an economic and social dimension, as well as an ecological reality.

Against this backdrop, China has rapidly taken centre stage, at once as ‘victim’ of historical transformation and pollution of the biosphere by developed nations, and ‘perpetrator’ – as it steals the title of ‘first polluter’ from the richest country in the world (Bina and Soromenho-Marques 2008). By virtue of its sheer size and growth trajectory, China appears to have focused the minds of leaders across the world on the physical limits of our planet and the challenge of having to share its common resources with a growing population, in ways that *Limits to Growth, Our Common Future, Agenda 21* and the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* have frustratingly failed to do (Meadows *et al.* 1972 ; WCED 1987 ; UNCED 1992 ; MEA 2005). Economic growth and the environment have never looked quite so in conflict as in the case of China. The contribution of this growth to climate change is raising alarm inside and beyond the country’s borders, precisely as a result of the ecological interdependence so strenuously ignored thanks to the successful separation of the world of economics from the biosphere.

The climate change crisis is the ultimate expression of unsustainable patterns of growth. The tension surrounding climate change negotiations is therefore inextricably linked to the fundamental unresolved question of how to reconcile an increasingly widespread pursuit of growth with the finite nature of our planet.² Based on this perspective of the climate change debate, I explore the theme of responsibility as traditionally focused around the need to limit emissions, but also in terms of the obligation to pursue development aspirations through a different path. I consider the argument that China’s leadership has an opportunity to embark on a path that is consistent with the need to secure a ‘common future’, and highlight both the promise and contradictions of current policy. On balance, evidence suggests that this opportunity is still to be taken, while there is a risk of falling into undifferentiated irresponsibility for all parties. I conclude by challenging the idea that there is a significant difference between the position of China’s Government and that of most developed nations, and suggest that the promise of a new path for development might still be met if contradictions are finally acknowledged, and experimentation is adopted to pursue bold alternatives, rather than efficient growth models.

Framing The Issue of Responsibility

The Chinese Government does not deny the science or the importance of the climate change crisis (NDRC 2007b). Ambassador Yu Qingtai (2008), China’s Special Representative for Climate Change Talks, acknowledges that climate change ‘affects not only the development of the global economy and prosperity, but also the very existence of mankind’, and confirms that his Government actively supports ‘the leadership role played by the United Nations in responding to climate change’. Within this international framework of negotiations three points seem crucial (Yu Qingtai 2008): 1) the centrality of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ‘fundamental principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities’ as the ‘very foundation for international cooperation’; 2) ‘the concerns by the developing countries over adaptation, technology transfer and financial resources should

² The use of energy is illustrative. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA 2007) China accounted for four fifths of the growth of industrial production and carbon dioxide emissions during the past 25 years. It predicts that between 2004-2030 China and India will account for approximately 75 percent of global coal demand and 35 percent of oil demand, and for 35 percent of global power generation capacity.

be addressed in real earnest'; and 3) 'the effectiveness of participation by the developing countries [to the international effort] will, to a significant extent, depend on whether the developed countries will take substantive actions on financial and technological assistance... and capacity building, *to facilitate their achievement of sustainable development*' (emphasis added). Together, these three points define the strengths as well as the contradictions in the approach of China's leadership to responsibility.

The first reference to common but differentiated responsibilities refers to the need to limit emissions and is central to the debate and impasse in the negotiations. While this is not the interpretation of responsibility used in this paper, it is the starting point for the argument whereby responsibility ought to relate to *how development is conceived* rather than to *how to responsibly clean up after development*, or at least after a certain level has been achieved.³ Amongst the arguments used by the Chinese Government to resist adopting emission targets is an appeal to the concept of historical responsibility. Quite apart from the intrinsic weaknesses of the concept (Miller 2008), reference to the presumed irresponsibility of England, Germany and the USA (followed by the rest of the developed nations), seems hardly a justification for the Government's insistence it can focus on improving efficiency rather than limiting total emissions. The richest 20 percent of the world uses over 75 percent of global resources and emits 51 percent of carbon dioxide to maintain its way of life:⁴ undoubtedly, developed nations contributed to a significant part of current concentrations of greenhouse gases in their quest for development, and while the benefits (development and lifestyle) are confined to political borders, the price of those benefits is being shared by humanity as a whole. Developing countries see the current crisis as the price for the development path chosen by rich countries to reach current levels of wealth. The price in terms of impacts affects all forms of life (but especially those in developing countries: UNDP 2007), the benefits have instead remained carefully contained within political boundaries. The perceived injustice explains the appeal to notions of responsibility: responsibility in relation to choices of development paths, which however cannot be raised against past choices without implying that current and future development paths ought to avoid irresponsible choices. This has important implications for the choice of China's leaders.

The pressure on China's Government is rising as it attained the dubious honour of 'first polluter' for energy-related carbon dioxide emissions in 2006 (Levine and Aden 2008). Its response has been to counter charges of environmental irresponsibility by reframing the climate debate as a problem of 'development', essentially appealing to the right to develop (NDRC 2007b).⁵ In the words of President Hu Jintao: 'climate change is ultimately a development issue and it can only be addressed in the course of sustainable development' (cited in Feng Qinghu 2007). Accordingly, China's leaders take every opportunity to remind the rest of the world that they must still battle with poverty reduction and that in per capita terms, the country's energy, emissions and overall resource consumption levels are well below the average for developed nations (see for example: CCICED and WWF 2008). They also point out that the 'ownership' of those emissions, and related responsibility, is a matter

³ In the case of China, as I go on to show, this level is likely to be the moderately prosperous society of approximately USD 4000 per capita.

⁴ This figure represents million metric tons of CO₂ emitted by all 'high income countries' in 2003; the figure for all 'developed countries' is 61 percent (data source: IEA in EarthTrends (<http://earthtrends.wri.org>) Searchable Database Results, accessed: 9/6/09).

⁵ The right is rooted in the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations 1945: preamble) promoting 'social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom'. During the last 75 years the number of commitments to this right have multiplied, and its articulations have explored the link with nature (United Nations Conference on Human Environment, Stockholm 1972) and subsequently found expression in the notion of human development by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, popularised by the United Nations Human Development Reports (UNDP 2007).

for discussion, since approximately 33 percent of China's domestic carbon dioxide emissions were due to production for export in 2005 (Weber *et al.* 2008).

The link between the risk of climate change and development is indeed at the heart of the problem, and the binding factor is energy. The use of energy plays a major part in shaping the interaction between the various parts of human society and the rest of the ecosystem. Societies grow in size and complexity thanks to ever increasing use of energy, and to date 80 percent of the world's primary sources are fossil fuels (Evans 2007). Development depends on energy, all the more so in a country that has grown at an average of 9-9.5 percent over five decades, primarily thanks to industrialisation and, since 2002, heavy and energy intensive industries. Even if all the efforts to promote a clean(er) and more efficient use of energy were to bear their fruits (NDRC 2007b ; NDRC 2007a), the main source of energy will remain coal for decades to come (IEA 2007). This, combined with the growth projections for China, is bound to wipe out most benefits. By linking its right to develop with the need to remain free of any binding commitments (emission reduction targets), the Government is effectively expecting to take its turn on the irresponsible path. The same path tread by Euro/American societies. Is the appeal to historical responsibility combined with the right to pursue development the equivalent of wanting to extend a right to irresponsibility for all nations, albeit at different times in history? The Government aims for persistently high rates of growth until it reaches a moderately prosperous society is not only justified on grounds of poverty reduction, but also as a way of legitimizing the ruling Party and maintaining social stability:

'[t]aking economic development as the central task is vital to invigorating our nation and is the fundamental requirement for the robust growth and lasting stability of the Party and the nation' (Hu Jintao 2007).

Since the reform era began, China's remarkable growth has meant an equally remarkable – though less admirable – increase of its ecological deficit. Since the mid-1970s it has been demanding more capacity than its own ecosystems could provide, and is now requiring 'the equivalent of two Chinas' worth of biocapacity (CCICED and WWF 2008: 13). Given the record of environmental pollution linked to its development, which is affecting the lives of its people as well as contributing to the climate change crisis (Liu Jianguo and Diamond 2005 ; Pan Yue and Zhou Jigang 2006), the leadership's appeal to notions of historical responsibility could result in denial of the whole concept of responsibility, both within and beyond its country's borders.

Ambassador Yu Qingtai's (2008) message contained two further points that complete the link between (ir)responsibility, pollution and development. There is a lot that developed nations ought to do, and offer – funds and technology – to enable developing countries to catch up in the general rush to 'develop' before the latter is willing to engage in greater levels of responsibility. This is even more true about engaging with *undifferentiated* levels of responsibility, which would result from calls to reduce the responsibility gap between 'developed' and 'developing' nations that achieved high levels of growth since the categories were adopted in the Kyoto Protocol.⁶ The general failure to comply with commitments and promises by rich nations within the context of the Kyoto Protocol and subsequent negotiations has been noted: 'It is a pity that developed countries have shown insufficient sincerity and made inadequate efforts to fulfil... obligations' in terms of financial resources

⁶ China's representatives reveal an uncompromising stance on this issue, as it allows them to maintain differentiated, low, levels of responsibility, but also to claim a higher moral ground by depicting their efforts as significant: 'China is making huge efforts to combat climate change despite the fact that it remains a low-income developing county' (Xie Zhenhua 2009). For an interesting discussion see (Hu Angang 2009).

and transfer of technology (Feng Qinghu 2007), and implicitly used by developing nations to support their claims.

The weakness of developed nations' commitments and implementation record reveals a failure to grasp the significance of the challenge posed by their development model. This is not surprising: climate change is but the final symptom of a long chain of effects whose science was far less controversial, but which still await the political will needed to address them effectively (Jordan and Lenschow 2008 ; MEA 2005). Nevertheless, neither controversial definitions of 'developing country', nor failure to deliver by developed ones can justify the pursuit of *undifferentiated irresponsibility*. Such path would contradict the Chinese Government's message to the world (NDRC 2007b), exemplified by the recent article in *The Guardian* signed by Xie Zhenhua, Hu Jintao's special representative on climate change:

'With a deep sense of responsibility for its own people and the entire human race, China will continue to implement proactive policies and measures to address climate change and make unremitting efforts to protect Earth' (Xie Zhenhua 2009).

Opportunity and Expectation: A Promised New Path

How can one reconcile a claim to differentiated, essentially limited, responsibility with the proclaimed objective to achieve 'sustainable development' and 'protect Earth'? The Chinese Government claims it wants to pursue a new development path that would make it responsible to its people by improving the state of the environment at home, and to humanity as a whole by improving the efficiency with which it uses energy and other resources (Xinhua 2006). It is this promise, encapsulated in the political programme of 'scientific outlook on development' (*kexue fazhan guan*) and 'ecological civilization' (*shengtai wenming*) that suggests China's rise might be an opportunity for its people and for a common future. The pursuit of a new path acknowledges that economic growth is being 'realized at an excessively high cost of resources and the environment' (Hu Jintao 2007). The cost, depending on whose calculation is considered, varies between two and twenty percent of China's GDP (China Daily 2006 ; Liu Jianguo and Diamond 2005). As a result, the *Economic Work Conference of the Communist Party Leadership* of 2006 marked a departure from the uncompromising pursuit of rapid growth that has characterised the last five decades, concluding that the country must 're-engineer the economy' and search for 'a new growth pattern that is energy-saving, environmentally friendly and sustainable' (Xinhua 2006). A year later, the change was enshrined in Hu Jintao's *Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, as 'scientific outlook on development' (Hu Jintao 2007).

The program for a scientific outlook on development encompasses a range of ideas on and around the sustainability of development. It emphasizes the pursuit of 'a better life and sound ecological and environmental conditions' and embraces principles of efficiency, resource (primarily energy) saving and decoupling – all of which occupy a special place in driving the modernization of the State (Yao Runming *et al.* 2005). It is also seen as a driver for the new, people-oriented, more compassionate, direction of China's development that responds to increasing social disparity (Liu Guoli 2007). However, to date this new path is primarily one based on technological fixes: improved efficiency as the principal delivery mechanism of 'a resource-conserving and environment-friendly society' (Hu Jintao 2007), which has found expression in concepts of circular economy (reduce, reuse, recycle) (Jin Yong 2008 ; NDRC 2007a). It is efficiency and the pursuit of a circular economy that will enable a quadrupling of GDP by 2020 while ensuring 'sound ecological and environmental conditions' (Hu Jintao 2007). And the current stimulus package of 400 trillion RMB is testament to this focus. Several investments within the 10 Point Plan include an energy efficiency element; 210 billion RMB are specifically earmarked for energy and the

environment, for example for upgrading refineries (World Bank 2009).⁷ In a country with twenty percent of the world population, and seven percent of the world's land and water, efficiency in the use of resources makes eminent sense, and the significant role of heavy and energy intensive industry over the last decade has meant that a reduction of energy intensity by 20 percent per unit of GDP by 2010 (against 2005 levels) is now a national priority (NDRC 2007a). Similarly, great effort and resources are being devoted to the more efficient use of scarce land, especially agricultural land, and water. Beyond the generic statements of intention there is a very significant body of practical and administrative measures that, especially since the approval of the *11th Five Year Plan* (2006-2010), have been attempting to balance the pursuit of economic growth with greater attention for the needs of the environment and of the less fortunate sections of China's rural society more closely in contact with the devastating effects of the former (NDRC 2007a ; Pan Yue and Zhou Jigang 2006 ; Song Guojun *et al.* 2008).

Ecological civilisation was officially introduced together with scientific development at the *Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China*. Although official discourse refers to both the scientific outlook on development and ecological civilisation, often with no clear distinction,⁸ it is suggested here that the scientific outlook and ecological civilisation are not two dimensions of the Government's promised new path, but rather the former might be usefully considered as the means to the latter. The means focuses on efficiency, the end questions the development paradigm and aspires to a new era for humanity. Ecological civilisation represents a wider mission statement in response to the ecological crisis that is affecting the country. An acknowledgement of the need to rethink traditional models of growth in a country with limited biocapacity and limited options to export waste and pollution beyond its borders. The idea is to provide a cultural basis from which to transcend industrial civilisation and capitalism, advocating the pursuit of material and spiritual wealth through an ecological harmony rooted in traditional Chinese cultural ethics that recognises value in both man and nature (Beijing Review 2006). In the words of Pan Yue (2004? : 47-56) it represents a 'historical mission' for China to promote an 'advanced culture' that recognises Man as 'inseparable from other forms of life in nature' and which can only coexist through mutual restraint:

'all advanced cultures exist in nature... Man has the right... to enjoy material lives and seek freedom and happiness. However, such rights must be limited by the scale and environmental capacity'.

This interpretation is in line with the idea of interdependence and necessary limits introduced in the late 1960s and rediscovered with renewed urgency ever since. It reflects the leadership's concern with 'the future of global civilization' given global constraints as well as global ecological problems epitomised by dangerous climate change (Ma Jun 2007). Ecological civilisation subscribes to the idea proposed here, that the right to human development aspirations must be accompanied with the obligation to pursue a different development path. This is of course true for China as it is for the rest of the world, since limits and restraint can only make sense when national perspectives are transcended and consideration is given to the Earth system (I return to this in the conclusions).

Chinese official discourse on the need for a new development path has thus witnessed

⁷ It is worth noting that the updated version of the plan (from November 2008 to March 2009) has witnessed a significant contraction of the amount devoted to 'sustainable environment' in favour of 'technology and industry' and 'housing' (The Economist 2009).

⁸ Government representatives like Jia Zhibang (2009), director of the State Forestry Administration, links the scientific outlook of development with ecological civilisation and the need to 'protect[...] global ecological security and sustain[...] human culture' acknowledging climate change as 'a prominent threat to the progress of civilization'.

interesting developments since the *Sixteenth National Congress* of the Party. It suggests the Government intends to take a responsible approach both towards its people and towards the rest of the planet, which represents an opportunity to avoid dangerous climate change. Whether such opportunity materialises will depend on the further articulation of both the means (scientific outlook on development) and the end (ecological civilisation), as well as the capacity of Government to deliver on its promises. It is worth noting that the promise has been matched by expectations across the world. Internationally renowned scholars – including Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz, and commentators – including Sir Crispin Tickell, Lester Brown and Jonathon Porritt, have in recent years expressed the hope that China might lead the world to a new era of sustainable development. China as ‘a relatively late comer to the industrial world... has the opportunity to leapfrog over the mistakes of others’ (Tickell 2007), technology will play a crucial part in delivering more sustainable development (Brown 2006; Sachs 2007a), and there is ‘no reason why China shouldn’t become the world’s number one nation in terms of eco-efficiency’, according to Porritt – who defines the situation in China as ‘an ecological apocalypse’ (Green Futures 2006:3).

It seems there is almost ‘a *desire* for hope’ that makes most commentators tread the uneasy path between hope and despair, as if afraid to contemplate the wider consequences of China’s possible demise (Bina 2007). A substantial part of this hope is supported by faith in technology and efficiency gains as the foundations of a sustainable future. This faith is shared by the developing discourse of scientific outlook on development, and related circular economy. However, based on the Chinese Government’s current policies and funding priorities, a number of contradictions can be identified, which suggest that the solutions devised by the scientific development programme (the means) may not lead to the radical changes needed to shift to the new development paradigm of ecological civilization (the end). The result could be a failure to address the underlying causes of China’s environmental crisis, and to contribute to avert dangerous climate change.

The Contradiction in The Promise

Considering the most recent policies, economic plans and funding priorities from the angle of the promise of greater harmony seems to have been left behind, and the opportunity for containing the risk of dangerous climate change that might have come from a new path may be significantly weaker than expected.

The primary contradiction is perhaps the simplest and one which remains unresolved in many parts of the world, not only in China: that between environmental protection and development. Sustainable development has only contributed to muffle rather than solve this tension, and it seems that the Chinese concepts of scientific outlook on development and ecological civilisation might be heading in the same direction, judging from the content of the more recent public plans explicitly designed under the auspices of such concepts. While Hu Jintao's speech delivered at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference (Boao, Hainan, 12 April 2008) suggests there is still a desire to ‘explore and improve our development path and model in keeping with China's national conditions’, he also confirms a ‘commit[ment] to promoting the sustained and steady growth of the world economy’ (Hu Jintao 2008). The contradiction between improving the quality of development and the need for rapid growth persists. The Government advocates ‘sound and rapid economic growth’ though the quadrupling of per capita GDP of the year 2000 by 2020, and expects this growth to deliver ‘balanced development’ by ‘reducing consumption of resources and protecting the environment’ (Hu Jintao 2007). China’s *11th Five Year Plan* is meant to promote this balanced outcome, yet a mid-term evaluation suggests it has failed to live up to the promise: ‘insufficient progress on macroeconomic rebalancing and changing the economic and industrial structure has [meant] limited progress on energy and water intensity,

and environmental quality' (World Bank 2008: 11).⁹ The development path remains inspired by a traditional model of industrial growth and a market economy that depends on global exports. The plans for the forthcoming 12th Five Year Plan suggest little change is to be expected until well into 2020. The environmental chapter of the national plan is being drafted not in order to address the ecological crisis, but rather to support the imperatives of economic growth and social stability through the achievement of a moderately prosperous society by 2020.¹⁰ Initial proposals suggest that 'the pre-ordained economic development model determines environmental progress' and that until 2020 China can expect the relationship between economy and the environment to be in 'contradiction' and only 'preliminarily harmonious' by 2030 (China Environmental Law 2009). Once again, the model seems unlikely to change in any significant way. The implementation of the much-praised 'green' stimulus package of 400 trillion RMB is also revealing its contradictions as environment and social concerns are sidelined in favour of economic priorities, mainly expressed in terms of infrastructure investment (The Economist 2009 ; Tan Yingzi 2009). In the words of Zhou Shengxian, Environment Minister: 'environmental protection [is] not being highlighted in the overall plan' and recent reviews show a relaxation of the already bland implementation of pollution controls, and new environmental problems arising from many of the industrial plans in the Centre and West regions (Li Jing 2009).

The overall approach that transpires from the last decade of planned economic growth suggests that China's leaders are waiting for the environmental Kuznets Curve to reach the theoretical point of industrialisation and per capita income after which pollution levels begin to drop. Quite apart from the critiques of the curve's assumptions (Caviglia-Harris *et al.* 2009), this mode offers nothing that can be defined as a new, more responsible, path of development. Instead, the brief overview of high profile plans suggests business as usual for at least a few decades to come.

Given the efforts by the Government to redefine China's path to development, these results might seem surprising, were it not for a deeper contradiction within the overall promise: a contradiction between the ultimate need for restraint, intrinsic to ecological civilization (the end) and the unquestioned pursuit of growth, albeit efficient growth, central to the programme for a scientific outlook on development (the means). The latter is arguably aimed at 'putting people first' (Hu Jintao 2007), but its foundations in greater efficiency of resource use, primarily energy resources, seem to have sidelined the social dimension and the need to work within the country's biocapacity limits. It is because of the efficiency credentials that the scientific outlook is being considered a contribution towards climate change policies (NDRC 2007b). This appeal, almost fascination, with the potential of efficiency to deliver sustainable development can be linked to a desire to rationalise, control and shape nature (uprooting forests, redirecting rivers) which has characterised China's

⁹ The analysis explains how the country's capital-intensive, industry-led pattern of growth continues to be a key driver of economic and social imbalances: 'First, the capital-intensive, industry-led growth had been particularly intensive in energy, natural resources, and environmental degradation, thus accentuating the associated imbalances noted above. While energy and natural resource intensity was declining in several sectors, the relatively rapid growth of industry increased the weight in GDP of the most energy and resource intensive sectors. Second, capital-intensive growth created fewer jobs than a services-led growth pattern, limiting the absorption of surplus agricultural labor and contributing to the rising rural-urban income inequality and rural poverty' (World Bank 2008: 3).

¹⁰ The four key stages of economic growth were summarised thus by Wu Shunze, Deputy Director General of the China Academy of Environmental Planning: 1) industrialisation to be completed by 2030, 2) peak in the use of resources and energy between 2020-2030, 3) modernisation, including growth of the service industries and a reduction of pressure on the environment, to be attained between 2030-2050, and 4) mature urbanisation, high-income status and largest world economy by 2050 (China Environmental Law 2009).

leaders for millennia (Elvin 2004).¹¹ However, it seems to ignore a fundamental weakness: the inefficiency of China's industry is well known and certainly will benefit from greater efficiencies, but historical evidence shows that higher efficiency of energy conversion leads eventually to higher, rather than lower, energy use, ultimately negating the initial benefits (Smil 2005).¹² This is especially true for a country that is planning rapid and sustained economic growth, as well as unprecedented urbanisation by 2050. There is therefore a second contradiction in the promise of China's leaders: it can be expressed as faith in efficient growth.

In spite of the rhetoric invoking a different – responsible – development path, there is enough evidence to suggest that the leadership is pursuing the same path and committing the same mistakes that today's richest countries experienced. Both sides seek to mediate their responsibilities towards emission reductions through the seemingly unquestionable right to growth and to the pursuit of ever-higher standards of living. The result is likely to be one more step towards undifferentiated irresponsibilities. Efficiency *per se* ensures no harmony between man and nature. It acknowledges their interdependence, but without reference to limits and the need for restraint, it cannot lead to lasting harmony. This is of course the problem with the 'limited' responsibility at the heart of the Government's position in the climate change negotiations. Many of the arguments explored above will support limited responsibility on the grounds of equity. In practice however, the Chinese Government is confronted with the simple fact that by virtue of having the largest population in the world, and being one of its largest economies, it is also one of the largest and fastest growing pressures on the planet. Being a responsible player both at home and abroad will take more than efficient growth, and the shortcomings of recent plans confirm this.

Embracing Contradictions: The Obligation To Be Different

The analysis of the contradictions and limitations of current proposals echoes with that of O'Riordan (1983) who reminds us that contradictions lie at the heart of modern environmentalism. Environmentalism has its origin in divergent ideological modes of interpreting the environmental question: the ecocentric mode that assumes a natural order that man has the power to disturb, potentially leading to the destruction of the biosphere, and the technocentric mode that focuses on rational, value-free scientific managerial techniques to shape the natural environment and man's destiny (O'Riordan 1983). The first mode is concerned with 'ends', and the moral and spiritual dimension of choices, while the latter is primarily interested in the potential of science to develop the necessary 'means' of human progress. In many ways, technocentrism has succeeded in defining both the problem (be it climate change or development) and the solution (efficient growth, green economy). Ecocentrism instead struggled to translate generic consensual objectives into concrete policies and actions. The nature of the divide between ecocentrism and technocentrism echoes that between the idea of ecological civilisation and scientific outlook on development (although the former is not to be equated to econcentrism). If the Chinese leadership is to live up to its promise, and to the hope and growing expectations that it has contributed to create around the world, it will have to address the contradictions of its scientific outlook on

¹¹ The relationship with nature is also characterised by contradiction, as successive governments sought to control key resources for political and military reasons, all the while demonstrating a remarkable sensitivity and respect for nature's beauty and spiritual dimension: 'classical Chinese culture was as hostile to forests as it was fond of individual trees' (Elvin 2004: xvii; see also: Beijing Review 2006).

¹² The emphasis on energy efficiency so as to "produce more with less", has well known limits and even risks, as well as obvious immediate and short term benefits. The Jevons Paradox and the Khazzoom-Brookes postulate warn of rebound effects whereby savings accruing from more efficient use of energy lead to lower prices and eventually lead to increased consumption (see for example: HoL 2005 ; York 2006 ; Smil 2005).

development and invest greater energy in defining more clearly the nature of an ecological civilisation – its end, before choosing the means to achieve it. Taking responsible action to avert dangerous climate change will require much more bold proposals than those tabled to date, which subscribe more to a *responsibility for cleaning up after development*, than for *redefining development* in ways that openly addresses the limits we face.

As Harvey (1996) notes, globalisation is characterized by a time-space compression, and the turn of the century has been marked by a renewed awareness of the Earth as a closed system, with clear limits in terms of capacity and resources. These limits are made more tangible thanks to the projected population growth in China, India and Africa, and the sheer impossibility of extending the current lifestyle of rich countries to the ‘newcomers’ (for a detailed discussion, see: Brown 2006). The Chinese leadership seems fully aware of this:

‘I cannot accept the argument that I, as a Chinese, am only entitled legally to one quarter of what you are entitled to...But... being equal to an American when it comes to per capita emissions would be a nightmare for the Chinese’ (Ambassador Yu Qingtai cited in: Heilprin 2008).

Responsibility must therefore include limits and mutual restraint for the benefit of the commons and thus, our common future. This is true for China’s representatives as for those of all countries. Indeed, a question inevitably arises from this analysis: can any country be reasonably expected to define a new development path in an interdependent and globalised world? Given the current state of the global commons and the implications for dangerous climate change, the time for limited responsibility, whether by developed or developing countries – no matter how poor, seems to be over, and a new development path may have to be a global obligation.

The acknowledgement and analysis of contradiction is a distinctive characteristic of Chinese political thought, as much as experimentation is a unique trait derived from its revolutionary past (Dirlik forthcoming). Perhaps the greatest contribution from China towards finding a solution to the multiple crises the world is facing could be to place on the global agenda the contradiction between environment and development that is the legacy of Euro/American capitalism, forcing heads of state across the world to acknowledge what they must surely already know: that ‘win-win’ situations are rare and their pursuit is encouraged only thanks to the vagueness of sustainable development concepts. The climate change crisis is the ultimate expression of such contradiction. Chinese leaders have an opportunity to show a different path, living up to the promise of an ecological civilisation that is not simply a rehearsal of technocentric beliefs and efficiency-driven solutions. There is a need for radically different ways of thinking about the medium term – for long-term is now a luxury of the past if the conclusions of the IPCC are to be taken at face value, and a need to experiment now with models that will have to be in place in a matter of decades, not centuries. Only if world leaders are prepared to see the contradiction inherent in simple numbers, such as the energy figures from the International Energy Agency, will they take steps towards addressing – rather than discussing – the dangers linked to climate change. Only then will they show the long awaited responsibility and leadership they owe to our common future, averting the decline and fall into a pattern of undifferentiated irresponsibility.

In the words of a twelve year-old:

‘do not forget why you are attending these conferences, who you are doing this for. We are your own children, you are deciding what kind of world we are growing up in... I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words’.
Severn Suzuki speaking at UN Earth Summit 1992

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