China and Climate Change: Exploring a Non-Western Climate Discourse*

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Abstract

In recent years, addressing climate change has become a top priority of China's national agenda. There has been a rich body of literature studying China's position in climate policies and negotiations. However, a detailed analysis of the symbolic meaning and internal diversity of its position is lacking. This paper analyzes these issues through a discourse and strategic narrative lens, examining the connotations, characteristics, and construction of China's climate discourse. Four climate discourses in China are identified: pragmatic ecological modernization, climate nationalism, ecological civilization, and collaborative civil environmentalism. These discourses are consistent with China's national policy as well as its global vision. The dynamics of discourse adaptation, localization, integration, and innovation in the process of their construction, seen against the complex and changing domestic and international context, highlight the identity-based and issue-based strategic narratives. China provides a good example of a "non-Western" climate discourse that demonstrates an emerging country's interests and climate practices, and offers the possibility of breaking the North-South impasse in global climate politics. This paper concludes that climate change is an important entry point for China to gain greater influence on global governance through implicit discursive strategies.

Keywords : Climate change, China, discourse, strategic narratives, non-Western

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1. Introduction

Global climate change is one of the major challenges facing humankind today. China is undeniably an important player in the political response to climate change. While China has grown into the world's second-largest economy, its overall emissions have expanded dramatically. China has surpassed the United States and has become the world's largest Greenhouse gas emitter in the first decade of the 21st century.[1] It is reported that in 2019 China's emissions for the first time exceeded emissions from all developed countries combined and took a share of 27% of the total world emissions.[2] On the other hand, climate change has profound consequences in China. The meteorological changes and extreme weather brought by global warming will affect the ecosystem, social economy, food security, property safety, and human health. The Chinese government and society have reached a broad consensus on the necessity to address climate change.

Emerging China is under increasing pressure from some developed countries who question its status as a developing country and argue that development is no longer an excuse to exempt it from reduction commitments (Hurrell and Sengupta 2012). Domestically, the rapidly growing economy is accompanied by an ecosystem under tremendous pressure, and a comprehensive economic transformation is urgently needed. Against the background, China has gradually shifted its position from a defender of development rights who was reluctant to cut emissions to a more constructive role in global climate politics. China has put climate change high on the national agenda to cope with ecological and social impacts. China made several important reduction commitments in multilateral climate negotiation and cooperation and embarked on a low-carbon development domestically. Moreover, China not only pursues the right to development but also greater influence and initiative in global governance. How should we understand China's international and domestic policies on climate change, especially in the context of the complexity of climate change and the urgency of addressing it, the uncertainty of global climate politics and negotiations, China's traditional identity and new challenges?

This paper adopts a discourse-based perspective and investigates China's position and discursive practices that it represents in international climate negotiations. In other words, this paper focuses more on *what political actors say* (rhetorical action) rather than *what political actors do* (functional action)[3]. It probes the climate policies China seeks to display and how China expects them to be perceived by other key actors in international climate politics. The concept of strategic narrative, initially used to analyze alliance behavior, is employed in this paper to analyze climate change politics. Strategic narratives are produced by certain political actors with particular political purposes, which help people make sense of their identity, values, and goals (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013; Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014; Roselle 2017).

The discourse-based approach is suitable for analyzing China's policy and position on climate change considering the national context of China. Lo (2016) notes that China's policy formulation generally follows a process of: firstly, the central government issues laws, regulations, and policy documents (in most cases, in a short and vague form). After that, the state leaders specify policy instructions through communication letters,

[1] Climate Watch, "Historical GHG Emissions", https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions?end_year=2018&gases=all-ghg&regions=CHN%2CUSA&start_year=1990.
[2] Rhodium Group, "China's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Exceeded the Developed World for the First Time in 2019", May 6, 2021, https://rhg.com/research/chinas-emissions-surpass-developed-countries/#_ftn1.
[3] The terms "rhetorical action" and "functional action" are borrowed from Flockhart (2012), cited by Roselle (2017, 101).

public speeches, or policy articles; then, ministers or lower-level governments make further implementation plans based on these specifications. Moreover, decision-making is closed-door in China. There are hardly any arenas for public debates, consultations, or hearings, and the public can hardly access the official records of critical meetings. Therefore, to identify the official position of the central government and stakeholders on climate change, it is helpful to analyze policy documents, public speeches, and media reportage (A. Lo 2016, 95).

This paper argues that discourse theory provides a good starting point to add insights to current global climate politics studies by a non-Western experience. It unfolds the multi-level and multi-actor discourse construction, internal tension, and interactive relationships in China's climate engagement. In this paper, scrutiny of the climate discourses and the construction process helps us better understand various stakeholders' interests, strategies, and behaviors in the interplay of national policy and international commitment in climate governance.

This paper answers the following questions: what are China's climate discourses? How and by which actors are they constructed? What is the relationship between these discourses and China's climate position and policy? What are the relationship and differences between these climate discourses and Western mainstream discourses?

The analysis is primarily based on policy documents, reports, news articles, and relevant academic literature published in both Chinese and English. This paper is structured in the following way. The second section provides a historical review of China's international climate governance and national climate policy since 2000. Two dimensions of national policy-making and international negotiations are combined to form the contextual background of the analysis. It is followed by an explanation of the theoretical perspective of this paper — discourse theory and strategic narrative in the third section. Based on such theoretical consideration, I outline the dominant Western environmental discourses in a context of a discursive turn in international relations. I also argue a lack of a non-Western perspective of climate change discourses. To fill the gap, in the fourth and fifth section, I examine how and to what degree these shifts in China's climate position and policy correspond with the shifts in its evolving national agenda, national identity, and self-understanding of its role in international climate politics. I depict these shifts as a process of discursive learning, adaptation, and innovation, from being a follower to an inventor. Then, based on an extensive review of policy documents and academic literature, the fifth section has identified four main climate discourses in China. They are Pragmatic ecological modernization, Climate nationalism, Ecological civilization, and Collaborative civil environmentalism. Finally, this paper concludes by arguing that China's climate discourses conveyed by strategic narratives of identity and issue are constructed by domestic and international factors, especially those developed through redefinition and adaptation of the Western counterpart and innovation on its own.

2. China's position in international climate governance

The international community has recognized the gravity of human-induced climate change due to accumulating scientific evidence (IPCC 2014). Current international climate negotiation has revolved around the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its institutional structure established in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. China is under increasing international pressure to assume more

responsibility for emission reduction. At the same time, China is also facing the pressure of domestic economic transformation due to rapid growth at the cost of severe environmental degradation since its Reform and Opening up in the 1980s. The dual factors abroad and at home make China gradually change from resistance to active participation in global climate governance.

2.1 International position

China stepped into international climate politics at the Kyoto COP3 in 1997.[4] During the negotiations, China, together with other G77 countries, promoted Kyoto Protocol under the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) and equity principle. They opposed any binding emission reduction obligations for developing countries. China approved of the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and has been working on its flexible mechanisms, especially the Clean Develop Mechanism (CDM). China currently dominates the CDM market, with almost half of all CDM projects hosted in China. As one of the key architects and most vocal advocates of the principle of CBDR and equity, China has referred to it repeatedly in its official statements and climate negotiations (Stalley 2013).

Since the run-up to Copenhagen, China has become more inclined to "multiple bilateralism" that maintains bilateral relationships as a subset of a multilateral negotiation framework (Belis et al. 2018). The BASIC, consisting of Brazil, South Africa, India, and China, has emerged in the COP15 as an informal subgroup of the G77. China consolidates its position as a developing country through the links with G77 countries, and simultaneously, it defends its national interests and avoids further climate commitments through closer relationships under BASIC (Kasa, Gullberg, and Heggelund 2008).

The collapsed negotiation of Copenhagen COP15 in 2009 was a turning point for China's negotiating position and international image. Until the Copenhagen conference, China was quite resistant to making international commitments on emission reduction. In November 2009, just before the conference, for the first time, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao announced quantitative targets for emission reduction that China would reduce its carbon intensity by 40% – 45% by 2020 compared with 2005 levels.[5] Nevertheless, in the aftermath of Copenhagen, China was subject to severe criticism by Western politicians and media as the culprit who "wrecked" the negotiation.[6] Consequently, the conference failed to reach a climate deal after the end of Kyoto's 1st commitment period (2008–2012).

In the post-Copenhagen era, to respond to the increasing international pressure urging China to take more responsibilities and reverse the negative image as an obstructor, China began to take the initiative in global climate governance. In November 2014, China and the US released a joint statement on climate change concerning bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. In the statement, for the first time, China put forward a schedule for reaching the peak of carbon emissions. Before that, China refused to set limits on its carbon emissions. Moreover, China seeks to convey a positive message to the international community that China is ambitious in climate commitments. In China's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDCs) submitted to the 2015 Paris Agreement, it pledged to "achieve the peaking of CO_2 emissions around 2030 and making best

[4] COP, the Conference of Parties, is the decision-making body of UNFCCC.
[5] The Chinese government, "Speech by Wen Jiabao at the high-level segment of the conference (full text)", http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-12/19/content_1491149.htm.
[6] Mark Lynas, "How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room", *The Guardian*, December 22, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/22/copenhagen-climate-change-mark-lynas.

efforts to peak early" (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). At the General Debate of the 75th UN General Assembly on September 22, 2020, President Xi announced that China will "strive to have CO_2 emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060" (the "3060 goal").[7] This commitment is unilateral, unqualified, and with a precise time point. In this manner, it surprised and won positive appraisals from the international community (Mallapaty 2020).

2.2 Domestic policy and action

The Chinese central leadership prioritizes ecological and environmental issues (Ho 2008; Y. Li and Shapiro 2020). This priority is reflected in the reorganization of institutions, direct leadership by the central authority, proactive ideological propaganda, and leader's speeches. In particular, the climate change issue differs from domestic pollution control in strategic significance related to China's foreign policy and global leadership.

In China, until the department restructuring and institutional reform of the State Council in 2018, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has been the leading agency in formulating climate policy. The primary responsibility of the NDRC is to formulate and implement national economic and social development policies comprehensively. This arrangement implies that climate change in China is framed as an issue of development closely related to the country's overall political and economic interests. In the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018, the Chinese government has established the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) and the Ministry of Natural Resources to centralize the management power of environmental issues hitherto fragmented in various ministries to these two departments. The issue of climate change belongs to the jurisdiction of the MEE. In terms of climate diplomacy, the NDRC and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) constitute the leading negotiation team of China in major climate conferences.

China's national climate change strategy is embodied in two documents: the annual report on China's Policies and Actions on Climate Change, and the other is the Five-Year Plan. The year 2007 marks a milestone for the history of China's climate policy process because China has formulated the National Climate Change Programme. Since the constitution of the Programme in 2007, China began to publish the annual report on China's Policies and Actions on Climate Change led by the NDRC. The decision-making body for climate change policy, the National Leading Group to Address Climate Change, was set up in the same year. The primary tasks for the group are formulating, organizing, and implementing national strategies and guidelines on climate change.

The Five-Year Plan is the roadmap for China's medium and long-term economic and social development, reflecting the priority and importance of various topics on China's national agenda. The 12th Five-Year Plan is regarded as a landmark in China's national policy-making on climate change, for it explicitly integrated climate change as a component of national objectives (Auffhammer and Gong 2015). The period of the 12th Five-Year Plan coincides with the negotiation and formation of the Paris Agreement. During the12th Five-Year Plan period, China's national climate policy has entered a rapid development period because the external pressure from the international community constituted a principal driving force (S. Zhu et al. 2020). China has embarked on a discussion of the carbon market since 2010. The idea of setting up a national carbon market is written into the national 12th Five-Year Plan covering 2011–2015. Establishing a national carbon market was a

[7] Xinhua Net, "Full text of Xi's statement at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", September 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/23/c_139388686.htm.

core task for the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016–2020). Since the middle of the 13th Five-Year Plan, the international influence on China's climate policy has weakened, and thus major impetus rises from within the country, affecting policy making by the interaction of external and internal factors (S. Zhu et al. 2020). In 2014, President Xi proposed that China promotes a comprehensive reform in energy supply, consumption, technology, and system.[8]

China talks about "carbon intensity" rather than absolute reduction targets in most of its climate commitments. This word usage is for a consideration that China is a developing country. According to the white paper on China's Policies and Action on Climate Change 2019, China's carbon intensity (carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP) decreased by 4% in 2018, a cumulative decrease of 45.8% over 2005. The proportion of non-fossil energy in total energy consumption reached 14.3%, basically reversing the rapid growth of CO_2 emissions. Furthermore, since President Xi announced China's ambitious "3060 goal", carbon neutralization has become a hot word in China's policy circles and society. Carbon neutralization is not a purely environmental issue but would be a critical field of geopolitical competition in terms of climate technology and renewable resources in the near future. State-owned firms and private firms have declared to respond to the national call and promoted roadmaps for carbon neutrality, including China's three major oil firms, electric power companies, and tech giants. Many firms also announce investment and green funds on climate change and carbon neutrality.[9]

3. The discursive turn in IR and Western environmental discourses

Climate change is a highly politicized issue that entails discursive debates, institutional competition, and the interaction of various actors. In the practice of international climate negotiations and climate action, an asymmetrical Western-led normative discourse system exists. Therefore, it can seldom reflect the interests and demands of the emerging countries (especially China and India), which causes opposition between the Western and non-Western countries and leads to an impasse in international negotiations (Parks and Roberts 2008). To understand the current situation of global climate governance, we need to introduce a non-Western perspective on climate change discourses. This paper attempts to approach global climate politics presented in the non-Western world through the lens of discourse theory and analysis and with the case of China.

3.1 A discursive turn in international relations (IR)

Discourse is a shared pattern of perceiving and assigning meanings to physical and social realities (Hajer 1995). Global politics is largely made up of contending discourses (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012). Climate change is no exception. In the multifaceted and complicated domain of climate change, there are contested and competing representations of the governance arrangements at local, national, and global levels (Allan 2017). In other words, the significance does not lie in climate change itself but in how people make sense of it. In this sense, the uncertainty in climate issues constitutes a political sphere of discourse construction, bargaining, and confrontation, where a wide variety of state and non-state actors can interpret, reconstruct, and create

[8] "习近平：积极推动我国能源生产和消费革命" [Actively promote the reform of energy production and consumption in China], People.cn, June 14, 2014, http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0614/c64094-25147885.html.
[9] Yao Zhe, Wu Yunong, "Carbon neutrality in China: behind the corporate hype", *China Dialogue*, April 12, 2021, https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/carbon-neutrality-in-china-behind-the-corporate-hype/

discourses favoring their interests. *Discourse analysis* consists of three dimensions: language, practices, and context (Angermuller, Maingueneau, and Wodak 2014). It includes an analysis of the linguistic characteristics of the *language* used. It focuses on the social *practices* and interactions where the language is produced and constructed by certain groups of actors. The *context* of such discursive practices is also vital since it constrains or enables the discursive subjects.

Studies of discourse trace back to early social sciences studies, such as linguistic studies of regularity in written and oral statements and Foucauldian political philosophy that explores the intertwining of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. The discourse studies in IR mostly follow the Foucauldian tradition and take a post-positivist way of thinking. Some seminal research programs done by post-positivist and critical IR scholars have led to a discursive turn in IR studies (Bolton and Minor 2016). Following this trend, I contend that dominant Western-rooted perspectives (such as constructivist norm studies and the global governance literature) generally ignore the subjectivity of the non-Western countries and some periphery actors. The non-Western perspective is under-presented in global environmental politics. Approaching climate governance through the prevailing Western discourses only tells part of the story. Doing so is arrogant, which could exacerbate the deadlock in climate negotiations caused by global inequality and even marginalize the climate change issue from the global agenda.

Discourse inherently possesses an attribute that gives vulnerable and marginalized groups equal opportunities to speak. Not only vociferous developed countries have discourse but also developing countries. However, in environmental and climate issues, the latter's discourse has been sidelined, partly because environmental issues have always been an instrument of great powers in high political issues. China's climate discourses mirror its internal and external tensions, interplay with multiple actors and institutional arrangements, and rising ambition of the state to assume international leadership. Emerging economies like China pursue the right to development and seek discursive power in climate negotiations. Their every move in the international arena is of strategic significance. Without scrutiny on the climate discourses and the construction process of emerging economies, we will miss the opportunity to understand better these players' interests, strategies, and behaviors in climate governance.

3.2 Mainstream environmental discourses in the West

Almost all the influential climate discourses originated in Western countries. The Western countries disseminate these discourses to the whole world, relying on their dominant position in the global political and economic order. There is a relatively stable discourse in Western environmentalism that encapsulates Western environmental policy and practices. It is not a monolith but consists of various strands and themes. This section gives a brief review of the mainstream environmental discourses in the Western context based on the oft-cited work of Bäckstrand and Lövbrand (2006; 2007) that have identified three environmental discourses that directly affect global climate governance, namely green governmentality, ecological modernization, and civil environmentalism.

Green governmentality. The green governmentality denotes a state-centric, top-down, command-and-control regulation model (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2007). In Foucault's original work, "governmentality" emerged from a query about the nature of governing. Given the limits of nature, a new modality of governing that combines sovereignty, discipline and government renders nature "rationalized, indexed, measured, assessed

and made better through the application of various technologies and modalities of rule" (Rutherford 2007). Green governmentality is characterized by the regulation of the techno-administrative elite through a managerial approach. In this strand of environmental discourse, nature is regarded as an object that can be managed and controlled by human beings and thus by states. The manageability and governability of nature and resources determine the central role of science and technology (Kuchler 2017).

Ecological modernization. The emergency of ecological modernization (EM) dates back to the late 1980s in Northwestern Europe. It refers to a positive win-win logic that ecological improvement and economic efficiency can be promoted simultaneously (Andersen and Massa 2000). Underpinned by a neoliberal logic, it is based on confidence in modern technology and its capability to increase efficiency and solve environmental problems (Hajer 1995; Christoff 1996). Incorporated in the broad sustainable development discourse, it dominates debates about global environmental issues and gains more prominence in climate change. The EM discourse portrays climate change as an opportunity rather than a threat. The compatibility of economic development and mitigation can be driven by technological innovation, such as developing green and clean technologies. The EM discourse adopts a more decentralized, bottom-up, multi-actor mode of governance that yields green growth through effective implementation of market mechanisms (often packaged in decentralized initiatives or public-private partnerships). The CDM mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol is a typical example of these flexible, hybrid, and cost-effective modes of governance. Another example is the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). Under this mechanism, companies can sell unused emission quotas to those who have exceeded emission limits. However, the EM discourse has been criticized for its inherent flaws as it disregards social justice issues and closes the window for fundamental social change (Bailey, Gouldson, and Newell 2011).

Civil environmentalism. Civil environmentalism is a counter-discourse to Ecological modernization, which opposes the techno-managerial rhetoric as it "depoliticizes" environmental problems (Lipschutz and Peck 2015). Promoters of this kind of discourse adopt critical perspectives and bottom-up methods to raise public awareness, promote collective decision-making, and affect the behavior of the government and corporations. The civil environmentalism discourse emphasizes extensive political participation to allow affected and marginalized groups to have a voice. Some social movements have been organized by the advocates around prominent climate summits by forming transnational activists networks (e.g., Climate Action Network), participating as observers in international climate negotiations, or holding demonstrations on the street worldwide (e.g., Global Climate Strike in September 2019). A more radical way of civil environmentalism thinking is the "deep ecology" or the "green radicalism" (Dryzek 1997), which prefers radical and fundamental change to the current global order in the name of justice, morality, and natural values. The advocates believe that humanity does not have the right to dominate, manipulate, or commodify nature to its favor (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006). Thus, they strongly oppose the market logic and inequitable power structures under the prevailing capitalist order.

4. Climate discourses and strategic narratives in China

As discussed above, China finds that it cannot resolve global environmental problems alone, so it gradually integrates into the mainstream international environmental politics and forms a unique Chinese approach under

the impact of Western environmental politics. In order to match its growing economic strength and position in international politics and to take the initiative in global governance, China started to strengthen its global discursive power by discourse construction and develop a unique "Chinese story" and its own "discursive system" in the international community (Boc 2015; Y. Zhang and Orbie 2021). There has been a rise in academic research on discourse and discursive power, which is part of a broad research program on the rise of China and its integration into global governance in recent decades.

The discursive power of China in global climate governance may come from three dimensions: institutional support, scientific soundness, and moral principles (Q. Li 2019). Firstly, China can achieve institutional discursive power by interpreting and reconstructing the existing international norms and regimes (Y. Zhang and Orbie 2021). Secondly, China can establish the advantage of scientific discourse by investing resources in climate-related scientific research and technological innovation. Thirdly, China has always adhered to the principles of CBDR and equity to help China take the moral initiative in international negotiations, ensure the common interests of developing countries, and pay attention to small and vulnerable countries. Li (2019) points out the discourse inequality under the North-South division in the current climate politics and the knowledge supply of the Southern countries to enhance their knowledge authority and discursive influence.

A handful of studies make a concrete analysis of Chinese climate policy and action in terms of discourse (Ellermann 2013; Tseng 2015; S. Wang 2018). Some gave a classification of China's climate discourse and observed the notable trend of the equity pursuit and the development of a low-carbon economy. They have noticed the necessity of examining China's domestic policy and discourse through the lens of a two-level game in global environmental politics. They nonetheless pay little attention to the Western roots of climate discourses and how their Western features resonate (or mismatch) in China as well as how actors perceive, interpret and act upon these discourses. However, there are exceptions; for instance, Wang-Kaeding (2018) applies norm localization theory built by Amitav Acharya[10] to explain that China actively borrows some Western concepts and localizes them by referring to Chinese traditional culture through a localization process conducted by state-led campaigns and local mobilization. I argue that the discussion of China's discourse presupposes the need to clarify its connotations in the complex and intertwined international relations in today's global governance and its interaction with mainstream Western discourses.

Under the umbrella body of discourse theory, the strategic narrative has been recently applied to Chinese official discourse construction. The notion of *narrative* here is close to story and an "imprecise way to refer to various kinds of language representations" (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017). *Discourse* is a more general term, and it can be the sum of a multiplicity of narratives. *Strategic narrative* is defined as narratives produced by a state with a clear political purpose and intention (Levinger and Roselle 2017). It emphasizes that storytelling is a political strategy. Roselle (2017) set out three strategic narratives: first, the *international system* narratives specify the structure of the system and the key players. *Identity* narratives specify the stories, values, and goals of the political actors. *Issue* narratives specify the necessity, advisability, and feasibility of a policy.

This paper seeks to follow this emerging research interest in Chinese climate discourse and its international position in climate politics. The following sections explore China's mainstream climate discourses and how it redefined the climate discourses that originated from the West and created new ones. These environmental

[10] See Amitav Acharya, 2004, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization,* Vol.58, No.2, pp.239-275.

discourses reflect how China perceives and addresses climate change (*issue narrative*), closely related to China's evolving national agenda. I investigate to what degree the shifts in Chinese climate discourse correspond with the shifts in its national identity and self-understanding of its role from a "follower" to an "inventor" in international climate politics (*identity narrative*). I depict these shifts as a process of discursive learning, adaptation, and innovation.

5. Four climate discourses in China

Environmentalism is not native to China but introduced into China from the West. Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, environmentalism and green discourses have mushroomed in China. China's evolving climate discourses — Pragmatic ecological modernization, Climate nationalism, Ecological civilization, and Collaborative civil environmentalism are consistent with China's shifts in climate policy and practices. Each discourse shows both the identity narrative and issue narrative but to varying degrees.

5.1 Pragmatic ecological modernization: adapted from the West

The pragmatic ecological modernization discourse shows the learning and imitation of the Western discourse. Since its Reform and Opening up, China has imported many Western-rooted concepts that are now popular and proactively promoted in China, such as the circular economy and green GDP. China does not endorse the logic of Western neoliberalism and the world economic order based on it but recognizes that it can satisfy the pragmatic development needs. It helps China open up to and integrate into the global market for economic growth; moreover, to assume a constructive role in the global political economy and realize the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (A. Lo 2016). Two typical examples in Chinese climate change practice show the emulation, modification, and integration of Western ecological modernization logic.

Firstly, China actively carries out Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) under the Kyoto Protocol to achieve low-cost emission reduction. While the Kyoto Protocol exempted developing countries from reduction commitment, it set up three flexible mechanisms to offer incentives to developing countries to reduce emissions, namely international emissions trading, joint implementation, and CDM (Chan, Stavins, and Ji 2018). Among these mechanisms, activities under the CDM are the most dynamic. The CDM allows a country to implement emission-reduction projects in developing countries to get certified emission reduction (CER) credits. The credits can be sold, traded, and counted towards meeting mitigation targets under the Protocol.[11]Among the Annex I developing countries, China and India are the two largest markets for CDM. As of July 2021, of all 7854 CDM projects, China and India have hosted 3764 and 1686 projects, respectively.[12]

Secondly, China learns from Europe and has established a national carbon emission trading market as the cornerstone of its "3060 goal". The world's first major carbon market was built by the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). There is a remarkable shift from the 11th Five-Year Plan to the 12th Five-Year Plan. By taking stock of the outcomes and effectiveness of policies in the 11th Five-Year Plan, the Chinese government has

[11] See https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-kyoto-protocol/mechanisms-under-the-kyoto-protocol/the-clean-development-mechanism. (Accessed August 4, 2021)
[12] The data were obtained by searching https://cdm.unfccc.int/EB/index.html. (Accessed August 4, 2021)

recognized that a top-down "target responsibility" regulative system that allocates energy conservation targets to local governments is not efficient (Qi and Wu 2013). Therefore, in the 12th Five-Year Plan, China embraces market-based approaches such as a national carbon emissions trading scheme. In 2011, China decided to establish a national carbon emission trading market and carried out seven pilot projects in five municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Shenzhen) and two provinces (Guangdong and Hubei) since 2013. The national carbon trading market was officially put into operation in July 2021. Although it initially only covers the power sector, it is expected to expand to other sectors in the future. Moreover, the monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) obligations are applied to other sectors by referring to experiences of the EU and the United States (World Bank 2020).

Rather than an environmental agency, the carbon trading system has been initiated and coordinated by NDRC. It suggests that carbon trading was initially considered an economic objective in China, stimulating low-carbon economic growth while reducing carbon emissions simultaneously (A. Y. Lo 2013). In 2018, China restructured the institutions of the State Council and transferred the responsibility for building a national carbon trading market from the NDRC to the Ministry of ecology and environment.[13] The carbon market mechanism has not only received strong political support in China but has also been welcomed by firms, as the quantified carbon pricing provides firms with the motivation to reduce emissions (Auffhammer and Gong 2015).

Some Chinese scholars point out the limitations of the Western-style ecological modernization, which is unaccustomed to Chinese reality. As the carbon market and carbon trading originated from a liberal political-economic system, it is controversial whether a Chinese carbon market transplanted from a different political-economic context works in China. Moreover, the basis of ETS, namely market environmentalism principles, is not institutionalized in China. The lack of carbon market trading infrastructure and relevant legislation also poses a challenge to China's carbon market (Auffhammer and Gong 2015). Rather than determined by market dynamics, in China, the carbon price is mainly determined by political intervention and governmental control (A. Y. Lo 2013). Even under such conditions, China chose to launch a national carbon market from scratch. In a sense, the carbon market is more regarded as serving a diplomatic need than an environmental one, for it deals with international pressure and promotes international cooperation (Goron and Cassisa 2017).

Market-oriented approaches raise concerns for aggravating economic disparity and social instability because a carbon market would increase the energy consumption cost. Moreover, poor-crafted plans of quota allocation will inflame the imbalance of economic development among provinces and regions. Also, its effectiveness has not been fully supported by empirical evidence (Zhou 2020). Hence, the Chinese government does not allow a completely free carbon market without government supervision. It is always cautious about wholesale acceptance and applying market mechanisms, especially in sectors related to the national economy and people's livelihood.

In general, China presumes ecological modernization merely as a tool for reference, aiming at technologically and pragmatically approach the problems in sustainable development, rather than introducing the overall ecological ideological system of the West. More specifically, values embedded in Western modernity like equity and citizen empowerment are not introduced (L. Zhang, Mol, and Sonnenfeld 2007).

[13] Slater et al., "China's national carbon market is about to launch", *China Dialogue*, January 29, 2021, https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/chinas-national-carbon-market-is-about-to-launch/.

5.2 Climate nationalism: old tradition and new identities

Climate nationalism is a common discourse in developing countries for their collective experience of Western colonialism, imperialism, and the ideological divide defined by the Cold War. China makes its way between old traditions and its new titles in international climate politics. The continuity and shifts in China's self-perception of its role are reflected in the climate nationalism discourse. What lies at the center of climate nationalism is an identity of being a developing country and further a collective identity of being a member of the developing world. China has shaped its national dignity from internal and external aspects around its identity as a developing country in climate change politics.

The climate nationalism discourse resides in the interweaving of science and politics and doubts about Western science. Nevertheless, unlike climate skepticism rooted in the conservative movement of the United States, this suspicion comes from nationalism. It does not doubt the authenticity of science and the existence of climate change but suspects the political "conspiracy" behind Western science on coping with climate change and the effectiveness of the international climate regime. As once been the world's political, cultural, and economic center, China's nationalism is intertwined with its ambition to revive its past glory. The West pushing for a commitment to climate change is seen as a secret plot (and even "climate imperialism") to constrain China's economic development (Liu 2015). Therefore, China attaches importance to developing its climate science and grasping the core technology and remains vigilant against Western concepts such as carbon tax. In particular, the cutting-edge areas of climate technology such as renewable energy development (e.g., photovoltaic) must be the core areas of competition among big powers in the future, for these areas are closely related to energy autonomy and security. Since the international climate policymaking is informed by evolving climate science, China finds it crucial to engage in the articulation process of scientific consensus. In this light, China displays enthusiasm in preparing the assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The Chinese media pays great attention to the increasing number of Chinese scientists who became the authors of these reports.[14]

Interestingly, another dimension of China's climate nationalism discourse is outward, which means establishing China's voice in the international debate on climate change. The climate nationalism discourse, as I suggest, is reflected in an evolving national identity with an emphasis on the dichotomy between developed and developing countries**.** This evolving identity is manifested in three stages: a responsible developing country, a constructive role in global governance, and a *de facto* international leadership.

Firstly, the primary identity remains as a responsible developing country in engaging international affairs. Based on this persistent claim, China emphasizes its corresponding rights as a developing country. The principle of equity and justice is implicitly or explicitly embedded in Chinese climate discourse. The Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained the Chinese government's understanding of fairness and justice as supporting the central role of the United Nations in international affairs, abidance by international law and generally-recognized norms of international relations, the expansion of the representation and right of speech of

[14] People's Daily, "37 名中国作者参与撰写气候变化评估报告 参与人数居发展中国家首位" [37 Chinese experts participated in the preparation of the IPCC climate change assessment report, the largest in developing countries], July 13, 2018, http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0713/c1008-30144340.html.

developing countries, and a fairer and more rational international order.[15] Some Chinese scholars of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) stress that a low carbon economy serves the human development objectives, which means achieving economic development and social progress on human dimensions such as health, education, ecological protection, and social equity (Pan et al. 2010). Furthermore, they point out that differentiated mitigation requirements are necessary according to different stages of national economic development, and the basic needs of human development in developing countries should be secured.

Secondly, China's self-perception of its role in global climate change has transformed into a constructive role. China attempts to shift its role from a rule-taker to a rule-maker in global institutions. China strives to establish rules and order conducive to itself in the first place. In addition, it responds to external vigilance on its rise. In the early years, China rejected any emission reduction commitment due to its development uncertainty. Then, in the post-Kyoto era, China actively formed coalitions of developing countries to enhance its voice and ensure climate interests in international institutions.

The Chinese government does not echo the "minilateral" trend that advocates climate club or coalition of core players. Instead, it remains steady in supporting multilateralism with a consistent endorsement for a settlement under the Paris Agreement and UN multilateral framework. In every year's National Climate Change Programme (2007–), multilateralism and multilateral collaborations are mentioned as a fundamental belief and a principal tone of China's international position on climate change. Adhering to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", equity, and respective capabilities is a consistent theme, which requires the cooperation of stakeholders over the world in line with the CBDR and equity principles.

Since the National Climate Change Programme 2008, "China playing a constructive role in international climate politics" has appeared in every year's text. This expression is often related to the Chinese concept of "Community of Shared Future for Mankind". It suggests that the global governance literature has gained currency in the Chinese policy circle and has been incorporated into China's long-term vision. Concerning the relationship with other developing countries, China has been actively working on South-South cooperation. China does not take mitigation commitments as a prerequisite for bilateral or multilateral cooperation, nor does it pressure other developing countries.[16] China's most prominent approach for third world diplomacy is the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), and the "Green Belt and Road", a new version combined with China's climate efforts. Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) has initiated a BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) platform for policy dialogue, exchange of knowledge and information, and green technology.

Thirdly, until the 2010s, China has pursued low-profile diplomacy, which is known as "hiding its capabilities and biding its time (韬光养晦)". With China's rise and increasing engagement in international affairs over the years, as some international observers suggest, China has shifted to a more assertive foreign policy. In recent years, the United States has frequently withdrawn from multilateral frameworks. The weakening of climate leadership caused by the decline of EU cohesion has led the international community to debate whether China can fill the power vacuum of climate leadership. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders have

[15] Wang Yi, "以习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想引领中国外交开辟新境界 [Guiding China's diplomacy to a new realm with Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era]", November 19, 2017, http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1219/c1001-29714534.html.
[16] Chen Gang, "China's quest for global climate leadership", June 24, 2021, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/24/chinas-quest-for-global-climate-leadership/.

never explicitly claimed China's *leadership* on climate change in international statements and speeches. Because in the Chinese context, leadership will immediately remind people of Western-style hegemony and hegemonism, which China tries to shy away from. In this regard, some Chinese scholars suggest a "facilitative leadership" for China, which follows a win-win logic based on cooperation and empowerment, and is distinct from hegemonic, coercive, or solipsistic international leadership (Chen, Zhou, and Wang 2018). They exemplify this point with China using economic power to attract neighboring countries to cooperate on BRI. On the issue of climate change, in my opinion, in addition to cooperation in climate technology and finance, China is also eager to attract like-minded countries with Chinese values and culture to achieve *de facto* international leadership in the field of the international environment.

Although there is an order of occurrence that relates to the historical background, the above three roles coexist in China's climate discourse. The evolving identity and perception of identity have determined China's public diplomacy in pursuit of international recognition and discursive power. It emphasizes intertwining processes of self-identification and discourse construction. Importantly, it is difficult to separate nationalism from patriotism in China. Discourse construction is also part of the "confidence-building strategy" for the local population (borrow the term by Lams (2018)). Over the years, what can be observed in both official narratives and public opinion are the unprecedented national sentiments and surging confidence in a "Chinese path" of national development and international leadership.

5.3 Ecological civilization: learning and innovation

The ecological civilization discourse attaches great importance to China's ecological transformation, which embodies domestic cohesion evoked by a sense of national pride and the greening of its international image.

The Western practice centered on a market-oriented mechanism has indeed brought beneficial experiences to China's participation in climate change governance. However, Chinese academic and policy circles embark on reflection and transcendence for the disadvantages of the Western style of ecological modernization. China is accelerating an overlapping process of ecological modernization and industrialization. Thus, it is crucial to coordinate environmental protection and development and avoid the Western development path of "discharge first, mitigate later", which means "realize a direct leap from non-industrialization stage to post-industrialization stage" (F. Zhu 2011). Given the international situations and domestic conditions facing China, the most reasonable modernization road is an "integrated ecological modernization", which refers to ecological modernization by promoting green industrialization and green economy and thus omitting the process of conventional modernization (China Center for Modernization Research 2007).

Although they look alike, ecological civilization is by no means a continuation or an evolution of the Western-rooted ecological modernization discourse. It is a domesticated attempt to articulate the relationship between humans and nature, which has sublimated the improvement of ecological problems and social development into civilization. The term "ecological civilization" has been recurrently mentioned by Chinese leadership since it was written into the report of the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2007. It was then put into the party constitution in 2012 and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2018. It is of highly political salience in China with a strategic position in parallel with political, economic, cultural, and social construction. China has incorporated climate change as an essential dimension of ecological civilization in its national development plan.

The ecological thoughts in Chinese history and traditional philosophy are referred to as the discursive foundation of ecological civilization. One of the essential elements is the idea of the "unity of heaven and man" (天人合一) in the Confucian ideological system, which fosters a harmonious coexistence between man and nature. It emphasizes the recognition and respect for the rules of nature, and actions should be taken in conformity with these rules.[17] Incorporating traditional elements and framing ecological problems as a cultural term brings about two merits. Firstly, this phrase "sinicizes" environmentalism and thus detaches Chinese climate discourse from the Western discursive system.[18] By resorting to Chinese culture and tradition, the party-state ensures its orthodoxy and political legitimacy. Secondly, using cultural rhetoric can tone down some ambitious and aggressive connotations, which aligns with the official narrative of China's moderate and peaceful rise on the global stage.

Domestically, it helps consolidate the legitimacy of the government. It is a tradition of successive Chinese leaders to establish a new ideological concept to show the continuity and legitimacy of the regime through the inheritance and innovation of previous concepts. Ecological civilization inherited some inherent ideas from the preceding guiding principle, "Scientific Outlook on Development". However, it is an upgraded version and more inclusive. The core of the notion is sustainability and the harmonious coexistence of humankind and nature. It means China will follow a "green path of development" that integrates human development and ecological values. A five-pronged approach (economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological progress) for civilization construction was formed in the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012 as an overall scheme of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics". Ecological progress is essential for the other four progress and links them up among the five dimensions. The Chinese government issued two guidelines in 2015, *the Proposal on Accelerating the Construction of the Ecological Civilization* and the *Overall Plan of Ecological Civilization System Reform*. These guidelines put forward several core concepts such as "natural capital", "spatial equilibrium", and "life community", and indicate ecological civilization as a new national strategy for sustainable development (Gu et al. 2020).

The ecological civilization discourse combines traditional wisdom with the current trends and pursues technological and economic development on the premise of human-nature harmony. In his speech, President Xi often quoted the traditional ecological wisdom. He put forward the famous saying "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" (绿水青山就是金山银山), which added scientific thinking to the "Chinese dream" that facilitates green development. Compared with the explicit win-win logic in the Western ecological modernization discourse, China's ecological civilization discourse dilutes the pursuit of economic efficiency and emphasizes the importance of the ecological environment.

Regarding foreign policy, the ecological civilization discourse contains a set of notions that collectively constitute the new global strategy of a rising China. China has actively introduced its practices and experiences in constructing ecological civilization to the international community to provide a reference for other countries, especially developing countries. In 2016, a report named "Green is Gold: The Strategy and Actions of China's Ecological Civilization" was issued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) during the 2nd

[17] Zhang Jing, "生态文明思想蕴含中国传统生态智慧 [Ecological civilization contains Chinese traditional ecological wisdom]", April 11, 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/zoology/2019-04/11/c_1124354499.htm.
[18] Heidi Wang-Kaeding, "What Does President Xi's New Phrase 'Ecological Civilization' Mean?", March 2, 2018, https://www.chinausfocus.com/energy-environment/what-does-president-xis-new-phrase-ecological-civilisation-mean.

UN Environment assembly.[19] Internationally, ecological civilization expands to global ecological civilization through the notion of "A shared future for mankind", an overall vision of Chinese diplomacy. It was proposed in 2012 and enshrined in the constitution of CPC in 2017, and it is a guiding concept for the BRI. Recently, it has been articulated as a "community of life for man and nature". This means that not only human destiny is connected, but also human destiny is connected with nature. The linkage with "A community with a shared future for mankind" signifies that climate change has been incorporated into the overall objective of China's engagement in global affairs as a vital non-traditional security issue. China shows confidence in its capacity to play a role in altering the existing order and constructing a potent Chinese vision of global governance. The willingness to actively participate in global climate governance is consistent with this ambition.

The ecological civilization has become the general guideline for China's environmental protection, though it is more conceptual than a guidebook for specific actions. As a national ideational guideline, the ecological civilization discourse remains vague in specific measures to address climate change. Therefore, it is a strategic identity narrative with symbolic meanings. At present, its significance of political propaganda is greater than that of the ecological environment. By building a "made in China" intellectual and discursive system, China seizes the opportunities in the international negotiations, invokes China's values, and gains a favorable position at a critical juncture of a global green revolution.

5.4 Collaborative civil environmentalism with Chinese characteristics

Civil environmentalism is less prominent but not invisible in the landscape of Chinese climate discourses. The Chinese notion of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are rather different from the Western concept of a "third sector" to counterbalance state and corporate power. Instead, the government recognizes Chinese civil organizations contributing to the state and working within the governmental framework.

Civil environmentalism is essentially a narrative about how to deal with the relationship between the state and society. Under China's political logic, the party-state and society are in a mutual transformation. The party-state gains acceptance by opening its political process to social groups; meanwhile, by accepting the political regime, social groups get their interests represented (Zheng 2021). Although it is not a democratic country, China values public opinion, for it is the domestic basis for supporting national discourse and justifying climate action and an important source of legitimacy of the government. Concerning climate change issue, "collaborative governance (协同治理)" becomes a proposal for healthy state-society relations in China. The "collaborative governance" features government-led social governance with "joint participation, consultation and cooperation of all stakeholders based on consensus" (B. Wang 2021, 105). According to its announced principle of building a "social governance based on collaboration and participation", the Chinese government recognizes and encourages social organizations to participate in climate governance.[20] Still, Ho (2001) pointed out that China has experienced a gradual development of environmentalism and the emergence of various green organizations, yet Chinese environmentalism was deprived of opportunities and urgency to confront the government openly. This point is where it deviates from Western civil environmentalism.

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[19] UNEP, "Green is Gold: The Strategy and Actions of China's Ecological Civilization", 2016, Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/greenisgold_en_20160519.pdf.

[20] The speech delivered by President Xi at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017. See http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

The uniqueness of Chinese civil environmentalism discourse is also reflected in the wording of what constitutes a civil sphere in China. Through carefully selected terms, it can highlight the differences between Chinese and Western versions of civil society in their backgrounds and forms. Expressions like “civil society” have gradually disappeared in China’s official lexicon and the public sphere. The media consciously avoid using these words that may trigger censorship (Snape 2019). The government is particular about the usage of language and prefers to use the expression of “social organization (社会组织)” rather than directly using the expressions translated from English. The organizations also emphasize their “philanthropy(公益)” or “charity (慈善)” nature in their names and activities. In so doing, some sensitive and antagonist connotations can be obscured, such as Western-rooted concepts of civility and public participation that entail a challenge to political authority and restraint on state power (Yuen 2018).

The intense state intervention in civil society has given birth to many “government-organized NGOs”, namely GONGOs. Also, numerous organizations are not officially registered due to the stringent regulations for registration. The regulatory system of civil organizations in China is known as the “dual management system (双重管理体制)”. According to this system, the civil organizations either register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs or with a “professional supervisory unit (业务主管单位)”. It means that they have to go through demanding registration procedures. Against the background, many grass-root organizations fail in formal registration due to these procedures. Some others register as a research institute or a company. Also, the activities of foreign NGOs are restricted by the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China”,[21] which limits the sources of funding and scope of activities of foreign NGOs.

Despite such harsh conditions for the development of civil society, some scholars are still optimistic about a constructive role for civil organizations. Yu (2006) also stresses that the non-governmental nature of Chinese social organizations does not mean that they have nothing to do with the government, nor are they antagonistic to the government. In China’s reality, the most influential organizations often have the closest relationship with the government. Zhan Chengfu (2016), the Vice-minister of Civil Affairs, suggests that the most critical function of social organizations in China is providing public benefit and public services, and the confrontational and separate relationship of civil society and state is not suitable in Chinese contexts.

While being an opposing frame in Western societies, civil environmentalism is represented in a unique form in China. The civil society actors in China seldom criticize or challenge the government but instead follow and take advantage of such “official perspectives” to achieve their goals (Willats 2017).[22] The activity of civil society actors is under rigorous supervision from the government, which is limited to public awareness-raising, education projects, energy-saving activities, among others with the sanction of the government, and street politics (such as public gatherings, protests, demonstrations) are prohibited.

Since the 2009 Copenhagen conference, Chinese NGOs have been active in the UN climate change conference.[23] During the climate conferences, representatives of civil society organizations were allowed to exchange views with the Chinese delegation, conduct educational training for Chinese youth and side events

[21] “Overseas NGOs” here refers to foundations, social groups, think tanks and other non-profit, NGOs legally established overseas. See the English version of this law at https://ngo.mps.gov.cn/ngo/portal/view.do?p_articleId=21833&p_topmenu=2&p_leftmenu=4.

[22] Some confrontational activities of NGOs have succeeded due to complex historical factors, such as the protest against the Nu River dam construction in the early 2000s. However, this paper examines the general situation and current trends.

[23] President Xi mentioned Chinese NGOs as a component in the global efforts to address climate change under the Paris Agreement in the speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Paris Conference on Climate Change, See http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/1201/c1024-27873625.html.

such as the “China Pavilion”.[24]

Nonetheless, global climate movements have little resonance in China. Some outward Chinese NGOs are open to the global trends and willing to imitate the Western mode of NGO campaigns. However, there is a gap between ideal and reality. The Chinese authorities are very vigilant about the contact and connection between domestic organizations and foreign forces and beware of some groups with ulterior motives which tend to interfere with China’s internal affairs under the banner of environmental protection.

Due to state propaganda and the public awareness-raising campaigns of civil society organizations, on the one hand, there is a broad consensus on the threat of climate issues; on the other hand, due to the positive framing of climate change by the government, the Chinese general public is optimistic and trust in Chinese climate diplomacy. However, against the situation, the subjectivity of Chinese civil society does not take a form of an independent reflexive sector that promotes government reflection. For Chinese NGOs, it is better to act as a follower of the government, keeping a high degree of consistency with the official discourse. Accordingly, little discursive space is left for civil society to make its discourse contribution.

In sum, Chinese civil environmentalism takes the issue narrative, which focuses on problem-solving. More importantly, Chinese civil environmentalism intentionally draws a clear line with the Western counterpart. A state-led and state-cultivated civil society manifests China’s “authoritarian environmentalism” (Martens 2006). It may have a political appeal when major liberal democracies are condemned for inaction or repeatedly fail to address environmental problems, especially climate change (Y. Li and Shapiro 2020). However, it is problematic in terms of civil participation and deliberation. Whether such a compliant civil society can achieve effectiveness greatly depends on the foresight of the central decision-making.

6. Concluding remarks

Climate policy in China is driven by both internal and external factors. China’s climate change discourses have been constructed by domestic and international processes. Undoubtedly, China’s concessions on international position and positive efforts on climate change are still based on the prioritization of domestic interests. Nevertheless, such interests are transforming from predominantly material interests (economic development) to incorporate more normative interests (international leadership and discursive power). From the perspective of discourse theory and discourse analysis, this paper has combed the mainstream environmental discourse in the West and identified four types of climate discourse in China. The four climate discourses identified above emphasize different dimensions of China’s strategic narrative on climate change. Among them, ecological civilization is an innovation with strong Chinese characteristics, and the other three are the adaptation and learning of Western discourses. These discourses reflect continuity and also major changes in China’s policy and positions on climate change. They more or less have particular symbolic meaning and actual impacts on climate policy. In China’s future domestic and diplomatic practices, particular focus is sure to be put on ecological civilization. It can now be seen that China is trying to popularize this value to the world. It shows China’s ambition to lead the global rulemaking and take the Chinese road in the field of environment, which also complements China’s other global strategies.

[24] Wu Yunong, “From Copenhagen to Paris: China’s climate governance journey”, *China Dialogue,* July 14, 2021, https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/copenhagen-to-paris-china-climate-governance-journey/.

This paper found that China takes the environment and climate issue as an entry point to establish a new and equitable international economic order that favors developing countries. This paper thus has gone beyond the mainstream environmental discourses fixed in the Western neoliberal tradition and looked into green development "with Chinese characteristics". China tends to borrow and import actively, rather than accept passively, the Western environmental discourse, and later move towards inventing and creating original ones. The primary motive for discourse construction is, first, nationalism to catch up with the West in economic development and environmental protection; second, ambition to gain a global rulemaking position. The absorption and refinement of Western discourses is a vital step in gaining world discursive leadership, for it helps integrate non-Western practices with the Western system of universal values. It is a tactic to accommodate external critique by stressing the time-space-dependent nature, and at the same time, manifest the Chinese values by differentiation.

This paper analyzed China's ideas on climate governance and how these ideas bring international status and discursive influence to China in climate change. A focus on discourse construction as a social process may ask how the mainstream climate discourses are (or have been) institutionalized in China's climate policies and practices both in international negotiations and domestic policies. Therefore, further research on "what it does" can be done by examining the discourse (re)production and concrete action at the local level and the center of power. Moreover, this paper also invokes a comparative study on climate discourses of other developing countries to gain a more general understanding of non-Western climate politics.

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