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Towards an “Ecological Civilisation”

UNDERSTANDING CHINA PT.4/5

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China has rapidly developed over the past 75 years. It has risen from a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country to the second largest economy in the world, lifting 850 million people out of poverty along the way.

This development has come at an environmental cost. However, in recent years, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has charted a new path towards ecological sustainability.

Artwork: *Rent Collection Courtyard, Wang Guanyi (1974). Art Museum of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing.*

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In 2007, the Chinese government proposed to build an “ecological civilisation” (生态文明) – a vision for repairing the oftentimes contradictory relationship between the development of human society and nature. In 2012, this vision was written into the CPC’s constitution.

In the last decade, President Xi Jinping has repeatedly reaffirmed the country’s commitment to this vision. For example, in his 2022 report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC, he set out a direction for China’s continued development that comprises harmony between humanity and nature as one of its five core elements.

So, how is China building towards this vision?

Sources: *Wang, He & Fan, Monthly Review (2014); Chak, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (2025).*





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Emissions Reduction

At the UN General Assembly in 2020, Xi Jinping announced China's pledge to reach peak emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060.* Crucially, China followed up this pledge with a "detailed action plan around [these goals], and has incorporated them into law."

If fully implemented, China's targets will lower projected global temperature rise by 0.2°C to 0.3°C. The country is already set to hit its 2030 target this year, five years ahead of schedule.

* These targets are not far off those set by Global North countries despite China having less capacity to make emissions reductions and being responsible for just 1% of emissions in excess of 350 ppm – the 'safe' limit of atmospheric carbon concentration.

Sources: *Martinez, The East Is Still Red (2023); Hawkins, The Guardian (2024); Hickel, Upstream (2025).*

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Renewable Energy (RE)

China is the world's leader in RE development:

- In 2022, China spent $225 billion more on RE development than the United States and the European Union combined.
- In 2023 alone, China added more solar capacity than the United States has in its entire history.
- China is set to account for 60% of the total RE capacity installed worldwide between 2024 and 2030.
- By the end of the decade, China will have developed over half the world's renewables.
- China is also supporting efforts internationally, becoming the largest exporter of solar panels to the Global South in 2024.

Sources: *Zarimba, Oilprice (2023); Murtaugh & Ding, Bloomberg (2024); Ambrose, The Guardian (2024); Jones & Copsey, Carbon Brief (2025).*



Transport

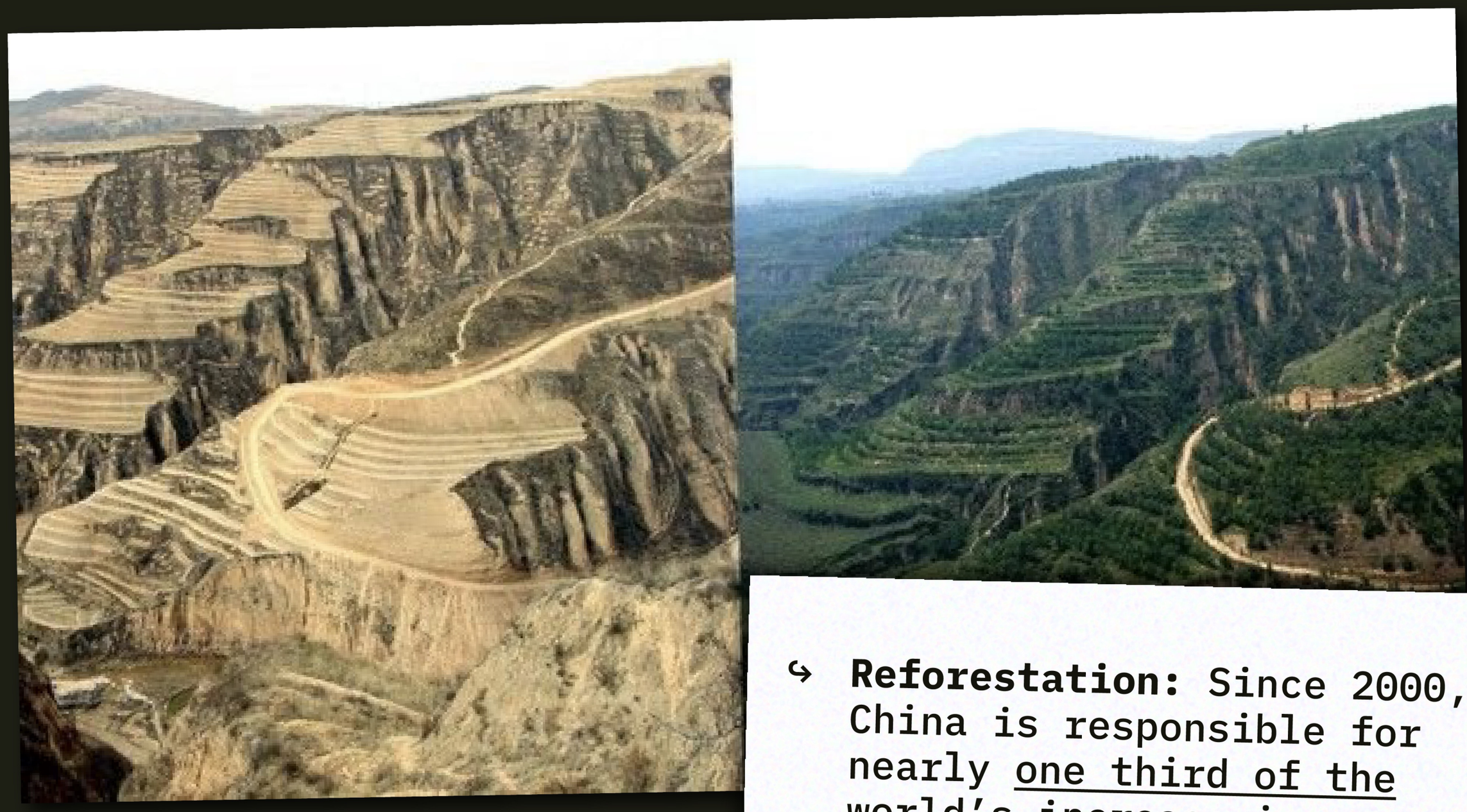
China is leading the way in low-carbon transport.

The government has invested heavily in low-carbon public transit. As of 2021, 59% of urban buses in China were electric – a figure that is expected to reach 72% this year.

In addition, the country has a world-leading high-speed rail (HSR) network. As of 2022, over 75% of Chinese cities with a population of over 500,000 had a HSR link. The country has 48,000km of HSR, more than the rest of the world combined.

In 2023, China accounted for 66% of total electric vehicle (EV) production globally. In 2024, Chinese EV firm, BYD, overtook Tesla as the top selling EV manufacturer in the world.

Sources: *Kaidong & Junting, Wenhua Zongheng (2024); Martinez, The East Is Still Red (2023); Zhang, Statista (2025); Sweney and Simpson, The Guardian (2024).*



Ecosystem Restoration

China has dedicated significant planning capacity and resources to restoring ecosystems affected by decades of industrialisation. Notable examples include:

Sources: *Chak, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (2025); Jie & Chak, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (2025).* ***Image:*** *China's Loess Plateau before and after restoration and regrowth.*

- **Reforestation:** Since 2000, China is responsible for nearly one third of the world's increase in planted forests.

- **Waterbody restoration:** China has launched many large-scale efforts to restore rivers, lakes, wetlands, and coastal areas. One such example is Erhai Lake, which, in 2013, was deemed "unsuitable for human consumption or contact." Through government leadership, CPC cadres, university researchers, local residents, and peasant farmers were all mobilised in a coordinated effort that has since returned Erhai to its former status, 'Pearl on the Plateau.'

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Air Pollution Reduction

Between 2013 and 2021, harmful particulate matter (PM2.5) dropped by 42.3%. This improvement in air quality increased the average Chinese citizen's lifespan by 2.2 years.

Source: *Chak, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (2025).* ***Image:*** *Liaoning, China.*

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There are still contradictions between China’s development and the environment. For example, China’s agricultural sector uses more than 30% of global fertiliser and pesticides despite only having 9% of the world’s arable land. China is also the largest aggregate coal producer in the world.

However, this investigation reveals a credible commitment from the government to acknowledge these problems and resolve them.

Sources: *Ling & Zhun, Wenhua Zongheng (2024); Patel, Carbon Brief (2025).* ***Image:*** *An open-pit coal mine, located in Fushun, in northeast China's Liaoning province, Yan Bo.*

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This is in stark opposition to the Global North, where there is widespread backsliding on green commitments.

For example, Mercedes-Benz shelved its plan to be an electric vehicle-only brand by 2030, BP completely abandoned its commitment to reduce oil and gas output, and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair recently commented that any effort to phase out fossil fuels are “doomed to fail.”

In this context, China presents itself as an ecological lighthouse.

Sources: *Kaidong & Junting, Wenhua Zongheng (2024); Wilson, Financial Times (2025); Elgot, The Guardian (2025).*



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This is part 4 of 5 in a series dedicated to understanding China.

In the final post, we will critically examine the US-led Global North's new Cold War on China.