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# Ecological Civilisation Discourse in Xinhua's African Newswires: Towards a Greener Agency?

Robert Boughen 

Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

How does Chinese central media represent Africa through its environmental news? This article argues that the way in which Chinese central media organisations have reported environmental issues across the African continent has altered from a reactive “charm defensive” towards the promotion of a developmental model: “Ecological Civilisation”. Based on a critical discourse analysis of headline African news published by the Xinhua News Agency, this research illustrates the emergence of this new, unexpected turn in Chinese representations of Africa, as well as highlighting the coherencies and tensions within this discourse. Questioning why this change in the emphasis of content has occurred, it investigates explanations at the macro-, mezzo-, and micro-levels of analysis, concluding that the evidence indicates that Xinhua's content remains closely linked to the soft power goals of the Chinese Communist Party. However, the presence of risk discourses in some reports indicates that the hegemonic discourse is altering. This could potentially be the result of Xinhua's own commercial objectives in Africa, or of the subjectivities of individual Xinhua journalists seeping into reports. This research provides significant contributions to an understanding of Chinese soft power in Africa, the ecology of Chinese media in Africa, and the development of environmental discourses.

## KEYWORDS

China–Africa; Xinhua; ecological civilisation; environmental journalism; news; soft power

## Introduction

This paper explores the environmental discourse of the Xinhua News Agency's English-language reports concerning the African continent. Based on critical discourse analysis of headline African news published on Xinhuanet, Xinhua's digital news platform, I argue that Xinhua's reporting of environmental issues has shifted away from a primarily reactive “charm defensive” mode (Shi 2015) towards the construction of a more coherent environmental narrative centred around the discourse of “Ecological Civilisation” (*sheng-tai wenming* 生态文明). Ecological Civilisation is a development model which seeks harmony between humanity and nature that has been adopted as a cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policy. There could be diverse reasons for this shift. It

**CONTACT** Robert Boughen  w1734010@my.westminster.ac.uk  @BoughenRobert

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could suggest that the CCP is propagating a development model to African audiences through its central media outlets. Alternatively, changes within Xinhua itself could be affecting its environmental reporting. Or Xinhua's journalists could be leading the way in reporting environmental issues. This paper questions what might be driving this change in content while also asking what this might say about China's international news ecology.

Previous analyses of Chinese central media's African news content have noted the presence of environmental reporting. This, in and of itself, is not unexpected: as Nelson (2013) notes, environmental reports are, in general, considered politically non-controversial, and have often been directly encouraged by the CCP. As is corroborated by other analyses of Chinese central media's African content (Wekesa and Zhang 2014; Zhang 2010), the CCP has long been keen to defend its record on environmental issues. The increased engagement between China and African nations has been met with scepticism by those concerned about the CCP's intentions, the sustainability of its development model, and its record on environmental and human rights issues (Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012). The impact of Chinese-sponsored infrastructure projects, raw material extraction operations, and the illegal wildlife trade have often been placed under the spotlight by both African and Western media (Brautigam 2009; Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012). Anxious about the potential harm to its international reputation and Chinese business interests on the continent, the CCP has routinely instructed its central media organisations to combat such allegations, directly countering any negative reports published by foreign media organisations (Xin 2009). This is indicative of what Shi (2015) called the "charm defensive" mode, which he argued would necessarily follow increased Sino-African engagement as problems and challenges arose within these relationships.

This limited, defensive style of Chinese environmental reporting in Africa is very different to the context of Chinese domestic environmental news. The market for environmental reporting in China is lively, varied, and central (Tong 2015). Critical and investigative environmental reports are both tolerated and often actively encouraged by the CCP, who have been keen to use such reports to communicate their determination and ability to deal with environmental challenges (Chen 2018; Tong 2015). As such, environmental issues have become one of China's most politically safe topics, and the development of this space has enabled environmental reporters to cultivate counter-hegemonic narratives and risk discourses, such as "extinctionism", which is typified by a collective fear of environmental crises and a sense of "doom", and "eco-equalism", which "sees environmental problems as problems with the nature of human beings and with society rather than problems with nature" (Tong 2015, 101). These present a potential challenge to the CCP's hegemonic environmental discourse: Ecological Civilisation (Geall 2018; Tong 2015).

### ***Ecological Civilisation***

Ecological Civilisation is a broad-based development model which claims its heritage from the Taoist system of "harmony between humans and nature" (*tianren heyi* 天人合一; Pan 2016). It is closely related to the Western concepts of "Ecological Modernisation" (Christoff 1996) and "Reflexive Modernisation" (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994), in that it can be seen as a direct reaction to the visible damage to the environment and society caused by

modernisation. However, for many Chinese thinkers, it is necessary to distinguish Ecological Civilisation from these other theories due to its particularly Chinese and socialist origins. For Pan Jiahua, Ecological Civilisation is informed by Chinese history, in which “industrial countries used advanced science and technologies to assault” nature and traditional Chinese society, spurring China’s own process of modernisation in the quest for national rejuvenation, and directly leading to China exceeding its ecological capacity (Pan 2016, 35–36). In this view, China’s chosen development path since the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) has attempted to emulate that of the West. In doing so it has consequently abandoned Chinese philosophical traditions of “harmony between human and nature” dating back 2500 years to the Taoist thinkers, Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi. Therefore, reclaiming and modernising the Taoist traditions into the form of an Ecological Civilisation model is seen as important both in terms of the patriotic effort of national rejuvenation and in restoring ecological balance to China. For Pan Yue—once deputy director of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA)<sup>1</sup>—China’s socialist ideals inspire its need to live within its own ecological capacity, and not engage in “environmental colonialism, nor act as a hegemon, so it must move towards a new type of civilization” (in Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012, 191).

Facing up to China’s deteriorating environmental conditions during the 1990s and 2000s, officials within the CCP began discussing the concept of Ecological Civilisation in connection with the “scientific development concept”, which formed the central platform of the Hu-Wen administration. However, Ecological Civilisation remained theoretically undeveloped and poorly implemented in practice during this period, and China’s environmental impact and problems continued to grow significantly during the Hu-Wen years. It was eventually included in the constitution agreed at the 18th National People’s Congress in 2012 (China Daily 2012). Since coming to office, the Xi-Li administration has increasingly placed environmental issues at the heart of its project of national rejuvenation, steadily shifting the symbolic legitimacy of the CCP away from growth towards sustainability (Wang 2018). This recently culminated in Premier Li announcing to the 2020 meeting of the National People’s Congress that there would be no national growth targets for the coming year (Feng and Birmingham 2020).<sup>2</sup> Over these decades, Ecological Civilisation has gradually developed from a Party watchword (*kuohao* 口号) into a hegemonic discourse, explicating a relatively coherent vision of the relationship between human development and nature.

However, its meanings are by no means stable or agreed upon within current scholarship, Chinese society, or the Party itself. For Tong (2015) and Willats (2018), Ecological Civilisation represents environmental protection as being compatible with economic growth, emphasising the roles of new technologies, national and global solidarity, and state-led intervention as the solutions to reduce resource wastage and restore ecological balance. For scholars like Pan (2016), it represents a more radical turn towards traditional values. As this discourse continues to establish itself in the Xi-Li era, it is possible that it will begin to encompass and consolidate elements of the counter-hegemonic environmental narratives outlined by Tong (2015) and Geall (2018).

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<sup>1</sup>This organisation has since been promoted to a ministry-level institution and renamed the Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

<sup>2</sup>It is also important, however, to take into account the role of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down large swathes of the Chinese and world economy for several months, in this change of course.

Because significant changes have occurred in both Sino-African relationships and in China's domestic environmental discourse over the course of the Xi-Li administration, it is important to question how this might have affected Xinhua's environmental reporting in Africa.

## Methodology

This study comprises a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a week of African environmental reporting by Xinhua. CDA aims to "reveal the role of language as it relates to ideology, power and socio-cultural change" (Grant et al. 2004, 11). This enables us to ask "who uses language how, why and when" (van Dijk 1997, 2). The question here, then, is how the discourses that are essential to the production and reception of Xinhua's environmental news texts lend themselves to production and reproduction of the power structures of African and Chinese societies, Sino-African relations, and Chinese soft power. Employing CDA as a methodological approach is therefore vital, because critically analysing discourse requires accepting epistemological and ontological premises about discourse, acknowledging that "our access to reality is always through language" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2010, 9).

Phillips and Hardy (2002, 3) define discourse as "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being". Discourse is not, therefore, a discrete object: it exists only in relation to the objects to which it brings meaning, and so CDA is "not analysis of discourse 'in itself' [...] but analysis of dialectical relations between discourse and other objects" (Fairclough 2013, 6). These relations cut across disciplinary boundaries, and so CDA is inherently trans-disciplinary, meaning that it has no universal framework. The analytical framework employed is thus formed on the basis of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic environmental discourses outlined by numerous scholars, including Tong (2015), Pan (2016), Geall (2018) and Willats (2018). The analytical method is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional conception of discourse "as simultaneously (i) a language text [...] (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), [and] (iii) socio[-]cultural practice" (2013, 132), which informs a corresponding three-dimensional approach to analysing texts.

This positions texts as

the sites of the emergence of complexes of social meanings, produced in the particular history of the situation of production, that record in partial ways the histories of both the participant in the production of the text and of the institutions that are "invoked" or brought into play, indeed a partial history of the language and the social system. (Kress 1995, 122)

This positioning helps to bridge the gap between texts and contexts by linking textual microanalysis to analysis of wider social practices and institutions (Fairclough 2013). As such, CDA enables us to analyse the way in which Xinhua's texts bring the environment, and the human relationship with it, into being through their lexical choices, grammatical structures, and intertextual relations.

The analysis is based on a sample of 28 headline news texts, taken from the "Africa" tab of Xinhuanet. This represents a full week of headline African news as constructed by Xinhuanet's formatting, which presents four headline articles simultaneously at any given

moment. Four texts were collected per day over a single consecutive week (19–25 July 2019) and analysed in their entirety. Texts varied widely in size and in topic, from short “news flash” style reports about current events to longer narrative features and interest pieces. Of these 28 articles, eight (28.5%) made significant reference to environmental issues, a remarkably high percentage of headline news.

Xinhua was chosen as a case study primarily because it retains a privileged position within the Chinese media system, positioned as a ministry-level organisation “responsible for setting the official tone that other Chinese media outlets follow” (Xin 2009, 364), and is therefore expected to most closely resemble the Party line. However, the question remains as to what this resemblance would look like: a reactive defence of China’s reputation, or a proactive assertion of China’s strength and ability to correct ecological imbalances? Additionally, it is worth noting that Xinhua, while often being disregarded by academic studies due to this “propaganda role”, remains one of the largest international news agencies in the world both in terms of personnel and published news items, and maintains the longest and largest continuous presence of any Chinese institution in Africa (Madrid-Morales 2016). As such, it continues to be “one of the major international news sources in Africa” (Xin 2012, 128).

The sample is, itself, fairly limited. The necessity of capturing the sample “live”, as headline articles would only be presented obviously as such once a day, coupled with the time constraints imposed on the original period of study, mean that it is relatively small, and admittedly would have been reinforced by representing a constructed, rather than sequential, week. As an additional consequence of the limited size of the sample, environmental news reports covering only six African countries (Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia) were captured, which might not accurately reflect the full plurality of environmental news reporting or differences in Sino-African relations from across the continent. However, its strengths lie in its light-touch gathering method—the headline articles being chosen, as it were, by Xinhuanet’s formatting on a daily basis, rather than by the researcher—and its focus on “quiet news”, as championed by Wright (2018). The headline gathering approach allowed the environmental reporting in the sample to be seen relative to other headline news items, giving a better sense of the scale and scope of this reportage within Xinhua’s portfolio. The “quiet news” approach provides a better chance of interrogating a broader spectrum of normative values which shape news content which might otherwise be obfuscated by stricter editorial, at the mercy of economic or ideological imperatives, during “loud news” periods (Wright 2018, 14–16). That said, this investigation can only hope to provide a glimpse into its object of study, and merely seeks to provide a pilot to further research and lay out a variety of potential explanations for the content it analyses.

## Findings

The analysis found that Xinhua’s coverage had appeared to move away from a “charm defensive”, eschewing responses to negative reports entirely. Common concerns of international criticism of Sino-African relations were nowhere to be seen. Instead, a relatively coherent discourse built around the concept of Ecological Civilisation appeared throughout the sample, broadly conforming to the patterns laid out by Tong (2015) and Willats

(2018). However, the reports also covered a wide variety of topics, which highlighted complexities and tensions within the discourse.

In its simplest form, Ecological Civilisation discourse appeared as focus on “green” energy and industry initiatives. For example, one report’s headline read: “Chinese-built power transmission line boosts access to green energy in Kenya: official” (Xinhua News Agency 2019a), while another article’s text noted that a China–Uganda expo would “cover fields such as industrial promotion, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, and green development” (Xinhua News Agency 2019e). Although these articles did not address *why* these green initiatives were important, they make clear rhetorical links between industrial–economic development, Chinese-led technological innovation and solutions, and environmental protection.

Other articles discussed the commensurability of development and environmental protection in more depth. One highlighted the role of Chinese contractors, working on a Chinese-led port expansion project in Ghana, in protecting

a major sea turtle hatching ground of West Africa [by building] a sea turtle hatchery [...] in a bid to protect the vulnerable species [...] with a conservation team on a 24-hour tour around [the port] to ensure the construction work had little effect on the sea turtles, which are quite sensitive to noise and artificial lights. (Xinhua News Agency 2019f)

Although hatchery and port expansion could be seen as discrete conservation and development projects, the report did not draw these distinctions. The two were referred to collectively as “the project”. The headline, “73 sea turtles hatched at China-built port expansion project in Ghana” read as if the turtles were hatched *as a result of* the port expansion project, framing development and conservation as a single goal.

Another article, concerning a Chinese–Ethiopian–Djiboutian railway project and its role in Ethiopia’s “Four Billion Tree Initiative”, also suggested that development and conservation are intimately linked. The article hailed the electric railway project for “using renewable, environmentally friendly energy”, and also lauded the wider tree-planting project’s “bid to stop rising deforestation and help Ethiopia’s green economy strategy” (Xinhua News Agency 2019b). The report actively constructed a positive rhetoric around green ideals, stressing the “general benefits it has for the country [and] the benefits of the initiative passing to future generations”. A local participant, Radia Souad, was interviewed along with her daughter, Hawa Abubbaker:

“I took my kids to plant trees with me because kids learn from us. They have to learn all the good things from their parents,” said Souad. Souad’s long term vision is matched by the enthusiasm of her daughters, who can now find a safe, green and clean environment to play games. “It’s my first time to plant a tree. Trees bring fresh air and happiness, and I want to play many kinds of games with my sisters and brothers under trees,” said a visibly excited Hawa Abubbaker. (Xinhua News Agency 2019b)

This interview highlighted rhetorical connections between green values on the one hand and safety, happiness and friendship on the other, proclaiming clearly that planting trees was a “good thing”. A Chinese official within the article also appeared to acknowledge Ecological Civilisation directly, emphasising that “China has its own green economy strategy which encompasses tree planting initiatives and commended Ethiopia for starting its own tree planting initiative” (Xinhua News Agency 2019b).



Other reports, however, highlighted tensions in the discourse. For example, an article discussing a meeting of the China–Africa Water Forum, while again referring to the benefits of Chinese technological expertise and solutions, placed Sino-African cooperation on water management in terms of “human survival” (Xinhua News Agency 2019c), drawing on the counter-hegemonic risk discourse of “extinctionism” to which Tong (2015) refers.

In another case, a report on the construction of the Rufiji hydropower dam in Tanzania stated that the project will be eco-friendly. The President of Tanzania said only a tiny fraction of the Selous

Game Reserve, a world heritage site, would be used to build the proposed hydropower dam. The project has attracted intense scrutiny with conservationists both at home and abroad calling for a comprehensive strategic environmental assessment before it is implemented. (Xinhua News Agency 2019d)

Although the article opened with the President’s reiteration of the project’s green credentials and economic benefits, stressing its potential to add significantly to Tanzania’s power grid, as well as aid in water management, it immediately went on to address concerns about the project’s effect on Tanzania’s ecosystem. Here, a green energy project came into conflict with conservation efforts, highlighting tensions between development and environmental protection.

Additional articles in the sample also missed obvious opportunities to discuss environmental issues, such as one which examined solutions to the energy crisis in Zambia but made no mention of renewable energy (Xinhua News Agency 2019h), and another which covered the economic benefits of increasing tourism to Victoria Falls without considering the potential environmental impact such increases in footfall might have on the world heritage site (Xinhua News Agency 2019g).

## Discussion

The sample clearly demonstrates that, in this week at least, Xinhua was not conducting a “charm defensive”. Instead, its reports discussed a wide range of topics related to development and environmental protection, which were broadly informed by an Ecological Civilisation discourse. The question, though, remains as to why. What changes have occurred to cause this shift in Xinhua’s reporting? Building on the explanations of news production developed by Gans (1979), the rest of this paper will consider how this sample fits explanations at the macro-, mezzo- and micro-levels of analysis.

### *The macro-level—Chinese soft power*

The macro-level considers aspects outside of the media itself. Within the context of China’s authoritarian state-media system, and Xinhua’s particularly privileged position within that system, it is important to consider the role the CCP has in dictating Xinhua’s content. Xinhua remains a ministerial-level institution subordinate only to State Council, equal in rank with *People’s Daily*, the official Party newspaper. It is, therefore, deeply entangled within the state bureaucracy, and has traditionally been seen as being responsible for “propaganda targeting overseas audiences” (*waixuan* 外宣; Xin 2012, 2).



Xinhua's presence on the African continent, alongside other central media organisations, has widely been considered part of the CCP's wider soft power project to improve its international standing and present itself as a responsible, rising power (Corkin 2014; Ding 2008, 2010). In light of the United States' abnegation of its global responsibilities following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, several scholars have suggested that the Xi-Li administration has actively employed climate diplomacy and its Ecological Civilisation development model to advance its international position (Finamore 2018; Rauchfleisch and Schäfer 2018). However, as Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins (2012) note, as the CCP alters the way it presents itself and increases the scope of Sino-African relations, this may give CCP a responsibility *for* and *over* African spaces of development which conflicts with their long-standing policy of non-intervention in foreign domestic affairs (see Gagliardone, Stremmlau, and Nkrumah 2012). It is, therefore, important to consider how the sample constructs the issue of responsibility (Zhao 2019).

In this respect, the role of the Chinese state, businesses, technologies and expertise in combating environmental issues is highlighted throughout the sample. In all but one of the articles, China is presented as having (at least some of) the answers to African problems related to a range of environmental issues including water management, energy supply, and conservation. This was epitomised by a reported statement made by the Chinese ambassador to Namibia, Zhang Yiming, at the China–Africa Water forum:

China has the experience, resources and technology [...] to work with African countries for mutual benefit and win-win cooperation [...] Our increasingly mature [...] technologies are all good choices for African countries to solve water shortage problems. (Xinhua News Agency 2019c)

China is constantly presented as the solution across the sample. While Ecological Civilisation itself is never explicitly mentioned by name, China's model of sustainable development is venerated throughout the sample. As such, Xinhua consistently constructs China as a responsible world leader in environmental protection and climate mitigation strategies while promoting Ecological Civilisation as an appropriate model for African nations to follow.

On the other hand, it has also been argued that the CCP's soft power is actually "negative", in that it is primarily geared towards establishing domestic legitimacy through the creation of in- and out-groups, rather than increasing its international reputation (Callahan 2015). Ecological Civilisation supports this mission through its inherently anti-imperial stance, blaming others (i.e. the West) for China's environmental woes, and not merely "doing something" about environmental problems, but "doing something *differently*" (Goron 2018; Pan 2016). Indeed, anti-imperialist rhetoric has long formed a central part of how China has presented Sino-African relationships (Barr 2011), seeking to actively differentiate "itself from Western countries by stressing the common history of exploitation that both China and Africa had experienced under Western colonialism" (Ding 2008, 200).

However, there was next to no evidence of othering in the sample. No nation or actor outside of the context of Sino-African relations was mentioned. Reports were, on the whole, devoid of any historical context or references to imperial pasts. As such, Ecological Civilisation was not constructed here as a distinctly Chinese or socialist model of development. In fact, most of the Sino-African exchanges covered in the sample took place in the

context of multi- or bilateral scenarios, such as international forums. This corroborates the findings of Han, Sun, and Lu (2017), who argue that the Party press in China, while reinforcing the notion of “common but differentiated responsibilities”, has increasingly approached environmental issues from the perspective of collective global efforts to combat them. It also supports Puppín’s (2017) argument that Chinese representations of Africa have steadily moved away from Maoist-era ideological messages of anti-imperialist solidarity.

A middle ground, perhaps, is found in Barr’s (2011, 34–35) explanation of the simultaneously “inward” and “outward” nature of Chinese soft power—that is, it is driven by entwined domestic and international concerns. Barr sees China as needing African nations in order to continue its economic growth, which has long been the foundation of the CCP’s legitimacy. Therefore, while China does seek to improve its international reputation, this is mainly understood as a conduit for increased trade. As Finamore (2018) notes, the climate crisis has engendered one of the largest market opportunities of the twenty-first century—green technology—which, she points out, China is already well poised to take advantage of, being the world’s largest producer of renewable energy solutions. It is then, perhaps, no surprise that half of the articles actively promoted Chinese solutions to energy and water management issues. This suggests a key role for Chinese central media in sponsoring Chinese business interests in Africa and helping to drive shifts in China’s export economy. It also conforms with the notion of Tong (2015) and Willats (2018) that Ecological Civilisation continues to prioritise economic development, albeit in a more sustainable and green way.

These findings indicate that Xinhua’s reporting in this sample broadly follows the Party line of supporting the CCP’s soft power project in its various potential guises and that Xinhua’s unique position within the Party infrastructure strongly informs its international environmental reporting.

### ***The mezzo-level—the Xinhua News agency***

At the mezzo-level, analyses tend to focus on the news organisations themselves as the key shapers of news production. Of particular interest here is how the changing commercial agenda of Xinhua might contribute to the shift in its international environmental reporting. As has been noted by Xin (2009), Xinhua has attempted to balance its African news portfolio in relation to both its role as a Party organ and its desire to become a world-class news agency, though not always successfully. As Xinhua—like all Chinese media—was weaned off of state subsidies during the 1990s and 2000s, it began to develop a formal commercial agenda to attract subscribers to its wire service (Xin 2012). Although subsidisation has been on the rise again during the 2010s, Madrid-Morales (2016) argues that Xinhua’s African news coverage has become increasingly market-oriented, focusing on the news that audiences want to read. It is possible that this could affect the reporting on environmental news.

As Anderson (2015) argues, environmental news has often tended to be very event-oriented, focusing primarily on disasters and crises, broadly conforming to the set of international news values outlined by Galtung and Ruge (1965). Jjuuko (2020) and Okpara (2020) also find this to generally be the case in both East African and West African environmental reporting, respectively. Environmental stories in these regions tend to revolve

around events such as floods, oil spills, and epidemics rather than focusing on either the systemic causes or potential solutions to these issues (Jjuuko 2020). In this respect, there is little that is conventionally “newsworthy” about the majority of reports in the sample, with most focusing on low-key events such as specialist multi-lateral forums and industrial projects. These articles might appeal to niche markets, such as Chinese or African investors, but hardly seem like headline material for an international news agency looking to attract a broad-based audience.

Alternatively, Hansen (2019) argues that

certain environmental issues or stories “resonate” more easily with common cultural narratives or preoccupations than others; certain ways of “saying things” [...] or reporting on issues/problems sound more familiar and perhaps therefore more plausible and trustworthy to media publics than others. (2019, 95)

That is, by analysing what issues or stories Xinhua is covering and how, it may be possible to understand better who the target audience is, and what agenda is driving the reporting. Most of the topics covered in the sample correlate strongly with the nine agendas of Chinese environmental reporting offered by Tong (2015), such as resource and energy management, water crisis, deforestation, and dam building. Also similar to Tong’s findings, there is no mention of climate change or global warming in the sample: instead, it focuses primarily on localised environmental issues rather than more abstract global images of the climate crisis, such as melting glaciers or starving polar bears. This correlation could suggest that the reporting is geared towards a Chinese audience. However, studies by Fosu, Quashigah, and Kuranchie (2019), Jjuuko (2020) and Okpara (2020) from across the African continent suggest that similar localised issues tend to be the focus of African environmental journalism.

Informed by a limited sample and lacking any reliable audience data or clear understanding about how Xinhua organises its environmental beat, it is difficult to assess how much Xinhua’s commercial agenda affects its environmental reporting. In particular, knowing who is assigned to write these articles would greatly improve our understanding of them. For example, whether the reporters assigned to the beat are Chinese or African (and then depending greatly on which nationality in particular) would likely reflect who the intended audience of these articles is, and further indicate what purpose they serve. Similarly, whether the reports are assigned to environmental specialists or generalists will matter too, particularly because the relevant scientific literacy to understand and interpret environmental issues is considered to be generally low among journalists (Jjuuko 2020; Okpara 2020). This might indicate the relative importance and rank of the beat compared to others within the organisation.

### ***The micro-level—environmental reporters***

Both Tong (2015) and Geall (2018) argue that the changes to environmental reporting in China are primarily the result of individual journalists’ creative and dynamic struggles within the context of China’s constrictive media system. For Geall (2018), the CCP’s relatively benign opinion of environmental journalism presents it as the optimal space within which journalists can “play the edge ball”—that is, push the limits of censorship—and contest hegemonic concepts about citizenship. For Tong (2015), Chinese environmental

journalists choose their speciality primarily because they are advocates of environmental protection, often as they have witnessed first-hand (or actively have been victims of) environmental problems. She notes how the majority of environmental reporters she interviewed were of a certain age, born during the 1970s and 1980s, and had actively witnessed the seismic changes in Chinese society's relationship with the environment over this period. Likewise, Zhang and Barr (2013) argue that personal experiences drive environmental politics in China. As they contend, "[f]or most people living in China, environmental consequences are not 'what if' mind exercises, but are everyday confrontations in the food they eat, the water they bathe in, the air they breathe, and the lifestyle they choose" (Zhang and Barr 2013, 10). This would suggest that journalists' subjectivities might affect the reporting, which could feature an obvious "advocacy" role (see Waisbord 2009), engaging counter-hegemonic discourses such as "extinctionism" and "eco-equalism".

However, the sample itself featured a mostly state-driven narrative. The main voices were almost always state officials—whether Chinese or African—and the environmental issues discussed were commonly refracted through the lens of government-to-government Sino-African relations. It is possible, as the Party press journalists who were featured in Pál's (2017) study of Chinese foreign correspondents recount, that this is simply what is necessary to get stories past the editors and censors.

While there was little obvious evidence of journalists' subjectivity seeping into the reports, two of the articles did tap into important counter-hegemonic narratives. The article concerning water management, for example, placed the importance of dealing with water shortages in terms of "human survival", a reference to "doom" which engages an "extinctionist" discourse (Xinhua News Agency 2019c).

Secondly, the report about the construction of the Rufiji dam (Xinhua News Agency 2019d) reflects a wider debate, both in China and globally, about the efficacy of dam building (Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012). It bears many of the hallmarks of critical investigative reports on dam building in China which "have incorporated and presented multiple voices from a variety of news sources, rather than expressing their own viewpoints against or in favour of dam projects" (Tong 2015, 71). It allows the Tanzanian president to wax lyrical about the benefits of building the dam, echoing the tone of the CCP on dams. However, the article also voices the doubts and concerns of conservationists and civil society, without coming down on either side. Although Xinhua has some record of investigative environmental reporting, such as its reports on the Qujing chromium plant scandal, discussions in the Party press calling dam building into question have not been common (Tong 2015). This could suggest that an individual journalist may have decided to report on this project by drawing on this reporting tradition, and that individual journalists are affecting the process of Xinhua's international environmental news-making, at least to a limited extent. Alternatively, these narratives might be being incorporated into the hegemonic discourse of Ecological Civilisation.

However, as there is very rarely any by-line accreditation in Xinhua texts (or at least not beyond the surname of the editor), it is virtually impossible to know who wrote the article, which leaves a level of speculation as to the author's motives or input. As pointed out above, the report gives little indication as to whether the journalist writing it is African or Chinese. This is important because, over the past decade and a half, Xinhua has actively sought to localise its news gathering and distribution through a strategy of "moving

forward the frontiers”, employing an unprecedented number of local–national correspondents across its African bureaux: increasing from 28 local journalists in 2005 to over 400 by 2011, compared to only 60 Chinese staff (Li 2017, 107; Xin 2012). There is a clear likelihood, then, that at least some of the sample was written by African journalists, although we cannot know for sure. This possibility opens up a range of questions about the values and experiences that African journalists might bring to Xinhua’s environmental reporting, and how these subjectivities might affect the development of Ecological Civilisation discourse.

It is also interesting to note that a Chinese state-owned enterprise did bid for construction contract of the Rufiji dam, but lost out to Egypt’s state-owned construction company, Arab Contractors. Had the dam been a Chinese–Tanzanian project, it is possible that stricter editorial control might have been applied to the article. However, in the event, this particular journalist was able to engage a risk discourse in their writing, which presents interesting questions about the coherency of the Ecological Civilisation discourse in the sample.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the environmental discourse of Xinhua’s environmental news reports from Africa. The findings suggest that Xinhua’s reporting has shifted from a “charm defensive” towards propagating a new model of development: Ecological Civilisation. The findings have been analysed against various explanations of news production to attempt to understand which agenda is pushing this change. The evidence suggests most clearly that the CCP’s desire to improve its image, continue economic growth, and maintain domestic legitimacy remains the driving force behind Xinhua’s environmental reporting. There is more limited evidence to suggest that Xinhua’s own commercial agenda, or the subjectivities of its journalists, are affecting this process. This implies that Xinhua’s portfolio remains primarily tied to the will of the CCP, that its role as Party organ means that its purpose is largely relegated to a soft power resource, and that the organisation’s dream of becoming a world-class commercial news agency is still fundamentally a dream. However, this study also suggests that further research into the organisation of Xinhua’s “green” beat, audience data, and the subjectivities of the journalists it employs may help to better understand how these layers of influence affect Xinhua’s environmental reporting.

A further line of enquiry would be into the development of the Ecological Civilisation discourse. The sample presents a mostly coherent vision of the relationship between humanity and the environment, which largely conforms to the notions laid out by Tong (2015) and Willats (2018), in that it presents development and environmental protection as compatible. However, there are cracks in this coherency, with elements of risk discourses seeping into certain texts. Whether this indicates that counter-hegemonic discourses are influencing Xinhua’s environmental journalists, or whether the hegemonic discourse Ecological Civilisation is incorporating these discourses is not yet clear. Further research tracking these discourses both longitudinally and latitudinally will be vital in understanding developments in societal relationships with the environment.

A final avenue for further research would be to consider environmental content produced by China’s other central media organisations operating in Africa, such as China

Global Television Network, *China Daily* and *People's Daily*. This would build a clearer picture of coherencies and dissonances within the discourse and its application by the CCP in Africa.

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## Note on contributor

*Robert Boughen* is a doctoral candidate at the University of Westminster (UK), where he is investigating the practices of Sino-African journalists.

## ORCID

Robert Boughen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7757-2328>

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