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Shengtai Wenming (Ecological Civilisation): Sinicising Environmentalism?

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The nebulous phrase *Shengtai Wenming*, or Ecological Civilisation as it is widely known in English, has attracted considerable attention in the Xi Jinping era. The current English-language literature largely views *shengtai wenming* in a narrow sense, often from environmental concerns, which fails to see it as an overarching concept, culturally and ideologically, underlying the overall thinking of China's development. A narrow view on *shengtai wenming* is likely to mistreat *shengtai wenming* as the empty rhetoric to justify China's environmental governance and overlooks its role in steering China's development that shapes the relevant policies the way they are. Moreover, the current literature on *shengtai wenming* lacks surveys on the continuity of the national development policies and the antecedent of discourse.

Hence this research aims to examine the ideational roots of *shengtai wenming* in the Chinese context and through the understanding of which, how the concept has shaped the thinking of China's development through continuous, overall planning on development with phased objectives. I argue that China is a developmental state [1] with economic development being the top priority, and a pivot to *shengtai wenming* in the current dynamics of China's development policies. My definition of China being a developmental state draws from John B. Knight's criteria for a developmental state: economic growth as the top priority of government policies and institutional interventions that assist in achieving the economic

objective [2]. This research, however, is less concerned with economic policies and institutional interventions per se. It focuses on the thinking behind *shengtai wenming* that shapes the various policies and government initiatives. It also attracts attention to the language or *tifa* [3] used in official publications, and how particular *tifa* can disclose the government's intention behind various policies. In other words, *shengtai wenming* marks China's economic development as the means to modernisation and civilisation with far-sighted executive plans and interventions. I further argue that the fundamental thinking of development in China is based on the perception of the contradictory pair (*mao dun*), ecological resources vs economic development, that limited ecological resources and capacity constrain economic growth. China's national development planning builds on its environmental conditions and *shengtai wenming* signifies the utilisation of "ecological" resources as the key to development.

This research explores the central question in two parts. The first part inquires how Chinese elites and officials perceive and propagate the concept of *shengtai wenming* over time. That is to investigate how the development of *shengtai* and *wenming* concepts - compounding the concept of *shengtai wenming* - underpins, culturally and ideologically, the Chinese development thinking today. By tracing the genealogy and development of *shengtai* and *wenming* concepts, this research reveals the easily overlooked usage, meanings, and connotations of *shengtai wenming*, and hence China's grand overview of development. Understanding these core concepts can help avoid the limited interpretation of *shengtai wenming* as a political aspirational goal of China's environmental reforms. Rather, the rhetoric is not necessarily about environmental protection, but about optimising the totality of "ecological" resources for economic development. The multilayered meanings of the *wenming* concept do not only function as an emotional engine but also a measuring instrument deployed for governance at various levels alongside China's developmental goals. The second part of the research assesses how the ideation of *shengtai wenming* is articulated and accommodated through key national economic and environmental policies. Government initiatives linked to the discourse of *shengtai wenming* reflect the thinking underlying those policies. These government initiatives cover a wide range of themes and areas, which exemplify the implementation of a far-sighted, unified planning of development in practice.

Drawing from theories such as translation as translanguaging practice [4], history of concepts [5], and critical discourse analysis [6], this research takes a keyword approach [7] to examine the political concept of *shengtai wenming* in the Chinese context. The "historicity" of key concepts [8] is significant in understanding current political discourses in that 'the knowledge of history is encapsulated in the very structure of present thought' [9]. Further concepts settle on keywords [11]. Hence using keywords as the foundation for corpus-based research on political concepts can disclose 'interaction between concepts and social action' [10]. Using *shengtai* and *wenming* as keywords, this thesis conducts quantitative and qualitative analysis on selected texts from two influential newspaper databases: *Shen Pao* (申报, 1872-1949) and *People's Daily* (人民日报 1946-2020). *Shen Pao* is a typical newspaper that represented Chinese elites and politicians during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This database provides sufficient materials to depict the developing trajectory of key concepts during a period when the old concepts encountered the new (or modern) meanings through translation and adaptation. The *People's Daily*, providing its nature as the largest official newspaper in China, is a platform for the central government to publicise national policies and government initiatives targeting domestic audiences. Therefore, it is an authoritative database to investigate the ideational roots of *shengtai wenming*, as the ideas underpinning national developmental thinking and the messages the centre are conveyed to the general public. Involving a large number of texts, this research employs Nvivo, a computer

software package assisting the mixed-methods research, to analyse the selected data.

Taking a discursive approach, this research will supplement the current literature by providing a new angle on the study of *shengtai wenming* and China's development. Understanding the ideational roots of *shengtai wenming* assists our understanding of variegated and often contradictory policies couched in terms of *shengtai wenming*. It also serves as a case of research in the digital humanities, where using keywords as the basis for research in a text-as-data project on political discourse and policy analysis. This research also has the potential to expand to include a larger set of data with the help of automated text analysis.

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