


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Food Consumption, Eco-civilization and Environmental Authoritarianism in China

Franziska M. Fröhlich 

Lise Meitner Research Group “China in the Global System of Science,” Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, Germany

Email: [fmfroehlich@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de](mailto:fmfroehlich@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de)

## Abstract

In response to its severe environmental problems, China’s government is pursuing a national goal to “build an ecological civilization.” One approach used to theorize about China’s environmental governance is environmental authoritarianism (EA). Drawing on work in political steering theory and the governmentality tradition, this paper addresses the “soft” side of EA by analysing the eco-civilization discourse on food and eating in policy documents and consumer guidebooks. It argues that China’s EA works not only through coercion but also through citizen responsabilization. The emerging discourse of eco-civilization outlines a cultural nationalist programme focused on virtue and vice, in which consumer behaviour is morally charged. Consumers are expected to cultivate themselves into models of ecological morality to fulfil their civic duty and support the state’s goal of building an ecological civilization.

## 摘要

面对严峻的环境问题，中国政府正在努力实现“建设生态文明”的国家目标。环境威权主义便是对中国环境治理进行理论探讨的一种方法。本文借鉴了政治指导理论以及治理术理论，通过分析政策文件和消费指南中有关食品和饮食的生态文明的论述，探讨了环境威权主义的“软”的一面。本文认为，中国的环境权威主义不仅通过强制手段，而且还通过赋予公民责任来发挥作用。新出现的生态文明论述勾勒出了一个聚焦美德和恶习的文化民族主义方案，其中消费者的行为带有道德色彩。消费者应将自己培养成生态道德模范以履行公民义务并支持国家的建设生态文明目标。

**Keywords:** environmental governance; ecological civilization; environmental authoritarianism; governmentality; political steering theory; discourse analysis

**关键词:** 环境治理; 生态文明; 环境威权主义; 治理术; 政治指导理论; 论述分析

In the face of increasingly severe environmental problems, the Chinese party-state (the state hereafter) has changed course. As Chinese citizens have begun to voice their dissatisfaction with environmental conditions such as toxic air they can hardly breathe and food they dare not eat for fear of contamination, maintaining a liveable environment has become a matter of regime legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> This reorientation has been ideologically codified as the country’s effort to build an ecological civilization (*shengtai wenming jianshe* 生态文明建设), a goal enshrined in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution in 2012 and the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China in 2018.

Environmental authoritarianism (EA) refers to a non-participatory and top-down form of environmental governance and has been used to describe the Chinese state’s approach to

<sup>1</sup> Li and Shapiro 2020.

environmentalism.<sup>2</sup> According to Mark Beeson and Bruce Gilley, who popularized the term in the field of Chinese Studies, EA as an approach to environmental governance is characterized by state-centric and technocratic policymaking premised on curtailing individual liberty and excluding public participation.<sup>3</sup> Beeson and Gilley's are broad-brush discussions. Other scholars emphasize that there are local nuances in how EA plays out on the ground and describe how local bureaucrats mix authoritarian policymaking with democratic elements. Local bureaucrats' decisions to use one or the other approach is heavily shaped by their desire to "get things done," which often motivates them to use coercive methods.<sup>4</sup> Authoritarian command-and-control is the state's "normative preference";<sup>5</sup> more participatory strategies are only used to smooth and accelerate the process, and preferably only at the implementation stage.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, other scholars have established the important role that softer strategies play in China's environmental governance. Virgine Arantes, for example, has shown how the local state cooperates with carefully selected civil environmental organizations (and represses others) to foster citizen self-governance. She argues that the Chinese model of EA combines coercive strategies with softer ones that build on people's voluntary and active participation, and that this "cooperative governance" is key to the state's ability to deal with environmental problems.<sup>7</sup>

It is this "soft authoritarianism" that this article engages with. In the following sections, I examine the state's discourse on ecologically driven change in food consumption to explore the discursive underpinnings that inform China's soft EA. I refer to it as the eco-civilization discourse on food consumption (eco-civilization discourse for short) because it is integrated into the state's eco-civilization ideology. I analyse texts that instruct and guide consumer behaviour, looking both at official documents that elaborate topics such as green consumption (*lüse xiaofei* 绿色消费) and green living (*lüse shenghuo* 绿色生活) as well as consumer guidebooks that build upon this discourse. Arguably, this discursive guidance of consumer behaviour constitutes "soft steering."<sup>8</sup> Drawing on governmentality theory to further conceptualize soft steering, I ask how the government's discourse envisions the greening of food-related behaviour, how consumers are positioned, what ideas about consumer responsibility are articulated and what this can tell us about soft steering through discourse in China.

The article is structured as follows. After introducing the concepts of soft steering and governmentality, I present the materials and methods used for the study. I then give an overview of the historical and social context from which the government discourse on the greening of food consumption emerged before I present the results of my discourse analysis, which I discuss in the final two sections. My main argument is that China's EA works not only through coercion but also through citizen responsabilization. The emerging discourse of eco-civilization outlines a cultural nationalist programme focused on virtue and vice in which consumer behaviour is morally charged. Consumers are expected to cultivate themselves into models of ecological morality to fulfil their civic duty and support the state's goal of building an ecological civilization

### Soft Steering and Governmentality in China

In a 2019 article, Gunter Schubert and Björn Alpermann present political steering theory as a new approach to the study of the Chinese policy process. As part of their framework, they introduce "soft steering" (*yindao* 引导) through discourse as one of the state's "steering modes."<sup>9</sup> By proposing this

2 Also called authoritarian environmentalism, with little or no difference in meaning.

3 Beeson 2010; Gilley 2012.

4 Li and Shapiro 2020.

5 Wang and Jiang 2020, 9.

6 Ahlers and Shen 2017; Wang and Jiang 2020.

7 Arantes 2023, 71.

8 Schubert and Alpermann 2019, 217.

9 Ibid.

term, they argue against scholars who claim that China has turned to horizontal governance, which is increasingly prevalent elsewhere in the world and strengthens the authority of social actors in shaping policies. Schubert and Alpermann instead contend that soft steering happens under the “shadow of hierarchy.” Social actors are granted greater leeway only when their actions align with state goals. This shadow of hierarchy is an explanation as to how even “soft authoritarianism” remains authoritarian. Alpermann and Franziska Fröhlich further elaborate soft steering through discourse.<sup>10</sup> They argue that the state directly and indirectly intervenes in public discourse to incentivize the prolific formulation of certain discourse statements while at the same time curbing or completely precluding the circulation of others. The state, therefore, maintains a propaganda apparatus that formulates preferred discourse statements and disseminates them through the media and ubiquitous public service announcements. Simultaneously, it reserves the right to preclude discourse statements that lie outside of a blurred, always shifting line of permissible statements through various forms of censorship.

Schubert and Alpermann argue that soft steering is “self-enforcing.”<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I apply this to understand that Chinese citizens become “enforcers” of eco-civilization policies; how this happens can be explained by governmentality theory. This approach focuses on indirect forms of steering (called “governing” in this tradition), which are made possible through processes of subjectification. The basic assumption is that governing, subjectification and responsibility-taking are closely related.<sup>12</sup> Individuals are made to adopt certain subjectivities, such as the green consumer, whereby they come to perceive the government’s ends as aligning with their own interests. In this way, they “produce the ends of government by fulfilling themselves rather than being merely obedient.”<sup>13</sup> The alignment of the individual’s and government’s ends is achieved by re-shaping the way that individuals make sense of the world and themselves. Ultimately, subjectification and responsabilization work through people’s dispositions and sentiments, such as desires, fears and ethical stances.

Responsibilizing consumers has gained traction globally in the context of the sustainable consumption discourse. In that sense, the promotion of consumer co-responsibility in the Chinese state’s eco-civilization discourse can be understood as part of a global trend. More importantly, it also forms part of a domestic trend. As various scholars have found, Chinese consumers are increasingly attributed responsibility to self-govern in ways that the state finds desirable, in areas as diverse as community governance<sup>14</sup> and child rearing.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have described the governmentalities underlying these responsabilization efforts as “neo-liberal”<sup>16</sup> and “neo-socialist.”<sup>17</sup> They have also shown that these governmentalities are designed to further the state’s “civilizing project,” which aims to create a civilized population that can serve the nation.<sup>18</sup> In this article, I will draw on my analysis to further characterize the Chinese state’s governmentality.

## Materials and Methods

Discourse-analytic approaches postulate that humans’ relationships with the world are mediated by collectively constructed meaning systems.<sup>19</sup> These meaning systems comprise signs which (pre)structure our perception and instruct both our interpretation of and communication about

10 Alpermann and Fröhlich 2020.

11 Schubert and Alpermann 2019, 213.

12 Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle 2017, 216.

13 Rose, O’Malley and Valverde 2006, 89.

14 Tomba 2009.

15 Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005.

16 Ibid.

17 Palmer and Winiger 2019.

18 Tomba 2009, 592.

19 Keller 2013.

the world. The meaning of material and social phenomena is, to a great extent, constructed with practices of sign usage where individual signs form part of larger knowledge structures. In discourse research, scholars analyse part of this knowledge structure in its manifestation as discourse. They reconstruct the rules and patterns that order discursive statements through the application of interpretive-hermeneutic methods.

For this study on the eco-civilization discourse on food consumption, I analysed both official policy documents as well as documents targeted at consumers, specifically consumer guidebooks. In line with governmentality theoretical considerations, I am mainly interested in how consumers are attributed responsibility. I therefore chose these types of texts because their textual function is (partially) to regulate behaviour by setting out the solutions and templates for consumer action that readers are expected to adopt. I collected my material both on and offline between 2015 and 2018, including during several field visits to Beijing and Shanghai between 2015 and 2017. My analysis focuses on the period between 2012 and 2018, as the material available during my searches is mostly from that period. I also looked at older documents to sketch out the historical context for the emergence of the discourse.

I collected publicly available national and municipal policy documents from the websites of state organizations using the search terms “green consumption,” “green lifestyle,” “low-carbon lifestyle” (*ditan shenghuo* 低碳生活), “green and organic food” (*lüse shipin* 绿色食品 and *youji shipin* 有机食品) and “food waste” (*shiwu langfei* 食物浪费). Through these searches, I collected and analysed 31 central-level documents and 39 local-level documents. I used the same search terms to gather consumer guidebooks. I browsed the displays and shelves of the relevant sections in some of the largest bookstores in Beijing and Shanghai. In addition, I conducted several searches of popular online sales platforms for books and magazines, namely *kongfz.cn*, *amazon.cn* and *taobao.com*. I ended up purchasing around thirty books, eight of which I analysed in depth according to theoretical sampling considerations.<sup>20</sup>

To analyse my material, I dissected the data by applying sequence analytic methods and used qualitative data analysis software to code my data. The goal of this step was to uncover the problem structure of the texts.<sup>21</sup> I focused on the following dimensions of the problem structure: definition of the main problem(s) as well as its causes, responsibility for solving the problem, solutions for the problem, model practices, model subjects and motivation for consumer action. In a second step, I identified the interpretive patterns that formed the basis of the various dimensions of the problem structure.<sup>22</sup> For example, in the dimension “model subjects,” I analysed a passage from a guidebook that exhorts consumers to do their duty as Chinese citizens and waste less food. Comparing it with similar passages in other texts, I chose the label “green consumer-citizen” to describe the interpretive pattern underlying those passages.

## Historical and Social Context

The state developed its green consumption discourse, which includes food consumption, at the same time as its global counterpart, the discourse on sustainable consumption, began to emerge. A decisive moment for the global discourse on sustainable consumption came at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The summit foregrounded the unsustainability of the industrialized world’s production and consumption patterns. It also crystallized a consensus among policy elites that relied on ecological modernization to solve environmental problems. Ecological modernization as an approach to environmentalism holds that economic growth and environmental protection can be reconciled through technological innovation, science-based rational environmental

20 Corbin and Strauss 2008, 144.

21 Keller 2013, 114–19.

22 Ibid., 121–24.

management and market-based instruments to transform production and consumption patterns.<sup>23</sup> Scholars have observed that, as a result of this new approach, non-state actors were attributed responsibility to participate in environmental governance.<sup>24</sup> As part of this trend of responsabilization, the idea that people should adjust their consumption to do environmental good gained traction globally.<sup>25</sup>

In 1994, China published its “Agenda 21,” a comprehensive action plan for the country’s sustainable development.<sup>26</sup> The white paper reflects the eco-modern shift of that time and focuses on the transformation of China’s economic structure towards cleaner production. The paper also assigns the population a share of the responsibility for the country’s sustainability reorientation through exhortations for them to adopt a new eco-consciousness. Given that the country’s overall household consumption was still considered insufficient, particularly with regards to people’s diets, greening people’s food consumption was not a concern at the time. Things began to change under the pressure of the new challenges confronting China during the 2000s. The mounting social and ecological costs of unfettered economic development forced the Hu–Wen administration to strive for a more balanced development model. In particular, the ideas of low carbon development (*ditan fazhan* 低碳发展) and green development (*lüse fazhan* 绿色发展) gained popularity. The administration envisioned them to be antidotes both to rising carbon emissions (China became the world’s largest carbon emitter in 2007) and global economic recession. Against this backdrop, Chinese policy documents of the 2000s began to present the greening of consumption as a strategy to boost the desired industrial policies. Green consumption became even more central under Xi Jinping’s 习近平 administration. When China’s growth rates fell below 8 per cent after 2012, green consumption was identified as one of six forms of “new consumption” that were to be encouraged to help promote an economic reorientation from quantity to quality of development.

The greater political focus on demand-sided sustainability also followed changing demands in the domestic market for safer, healthier and environmentally friendly goods and services.<sup>27</sup> Food consumption is a case in point. Sustainable food consumption practices saw a remarkable rise, including increasing sales of organic and green food,<sup>28</sup> the emergence of alternative food networks such as ecological farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture,<sup>29</sup> the growing popularity of eating meat-free meals and the avoidance of food waste.<sup>30</sup> These practices need to be understood against the backdrop of a growing discomfort with food production and consumption. People were concerned about the problems China’s modern, industrial food system produced, be it the mass slaughter of animals, rising consumer food waste, environmental degradation or, most importantly, the production of unsafe food.

This discomfort has been related to a pervasive sense of moral crisis in China.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have pointed out that food safety scandals, alongside other unethicities produced by China’s industrial food system, violate long-held expectations about the moral foundations of the food economy in China.<sup>32</sup> This has opened up space for a plurality of ways in which people seek to reconstruct the morality of food consumption and be moral food consumers. Consumer-initiated farmers’ markets, for example, often aim to build relationships between producers and consumers so that both sides can satisfy their needs. Such bottom-up projects have at times been critical of state

23 Bäckstrand and Löfbrand 2016.

24 Brand 2014, 57.

25 Evans, Welch and Swaffield 2017, 1397.

26 State Council 1994.

27 Zhang, Lei, Liu and Oosterveer 2019, 585–86.

28 Scott et al. 2014.

29 Si, Schumilas and Scott 2018.

30 Klein 2017; Zhang, Dunfu 2016.

31 Bunkenborg and Hansen 2020.

32 Merrifield 2020.

policies.<sup>33</sup> The discourse of ecologically driven change in food consumption as promoted by the state can therefore be understood as part of an attempt to define green and ethical food consumption.

As Jakob Klein argues, state–society relations in China have long been characterized by the centrality of the concept of “nourishing the people.”<sup>34</sup> The people extended their support in exchange for state protection from hunger and famine. Chinese policymakers continue to be concerned about ensuring food security, especially by means of a self-sufficiency in basic staples. It is therefore not surprising that, in the context of green consumption, the topic of consumer food waste became the central food consumption-related ecological concern for the government. This newfound interest in consumer food waste formed part of an international trend.<sup>35</sup> In a widely circulated 2011 United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) report, it was suggested that a staggering one-third of the world’s food production was either lost or wasted.<sup>36</sup> Then, in January 2013, the “Clean plate” campaign swept through China’s social media landscape.<sup>37</sup> Initiated by three professionals in Beijing who chose the catchy slogan “clean your plate” (*guang pan* 光盘), the campaign was meant to fight consumer food waste by making people aware of the extent of the problem in China. The campaign was quickly noticed by the state. National and local media took up the campaign and boosted the hashtag on Chinese social media.<sup>38</sup> It was this high-profile support which made the campaign a success and consumer food waste a hot topic in China.

### The Eco-civilization Discourse: Making the Environment a Matter of Morality

By 2012, green consumption was “increasingly framed through the concept of eco-civilization.”<sup>39</sup> The eco-civilization concept forms part of the wider ideological landscape of the Chinese state and is formulated as an update to China’s modernization path that demands good environmental conditions as a requisite for national development.<sup>40</sup> As previous research has found, the official idea of eco-civilization combines an eco-modernist stress on technological innovation, scientific planning and efficient markets with a cultural nationalist championing of China’s traditional philosophy, as well as a modern consumerist material culture with a traditional Chinese moral foundation.<sup>41</sup>

Against the background of the growing unsustainability of consumption patterns in China,<sup>42</sup> the government issued policy documents on green consumption and lifestyles and incorporated these topics into other policy documents on a wide range of issue areas, such as environmental protection, energy conservation and climate change mitigation. In line with the overall eco-modern orientation as well as the policy goal of making domestic consumption a driver of the national economy, these documents envision reconciling consumption and ecology through a qualitative “upgrade” of consumption (*xiaofei shengji* 消费升级) rather than a reduction in consumption. It is in this context that the eco-civilization discourse on food consumption unfolds.

### Problem definition: lacking eco-consciousness and wastefulness

State documents that call for a greening of consumption (i.e. clothing and transportation), lifestyle and eating usually enumerate a wide range of general ecological problems – particularly resource scarcity, environmental pollution and degradation as well as climate change. They do not

33 Zhang, Joy 2018.

34 Klein 2020, 342.

35 Evans, Campbell and Murcott 2012.

36 FAO 2011.

37 Mirosa, Yip and Lentz 2018.

38 Public Opinion Monitoring Office (*People’s Daily Online*) 2013.

39 Zhang, Lei, Liu and Oosterveer 2019, 585.

40 Central Committee and State Council 2015.

41 Geall and Ely 2018; Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018.

42 CCICED 2013.



specifically relate these problems to the food system or people's food consumption, however. The only ecologically relevant problematization of food consumption that appears in these documents is consumer food waste. In 2014, the Central Committee of the CCP, together with the State Council, issued the "Opinions on practising strict economy and fighting food waste," which specifically took up the matter.<sup>43</sup> The document stresses that food waste not only squanders precious resources but also produces large amounts of kitchen waste that needs to be dealt with adequately.

In contrast, the consumer guidebooks more directly relate the food system, and consumer behaviour in particular, to ecological problems and paint a more vivid picture of environmental challenges. They also problematize other food consumption behaviour besides consumer food waste. Examples of these problematic practices include eating too much meat, eating rare wildlife, failing to properly separate kitchen waste, eating non-local and non-seasonal food, preparing and storing food in a way that does not consider energy and water efficiencies or waste reduction. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that these other practices are problematized less consistently.

The most frequent problematization of food consumption behaviour in the popular material is consumer food waste. In 2016, the topic was covered in the new *Dietary Guidelines for Chinese Residents* (*Zhongguo jumin shanshi zhinan 2016* 中国居民膳食指南 2016), published by the Chinese Nutrition Society (CNS), which included the new recommendation to "eliminate waste and develop a new ethos of diet civilization."<sup>44</sup> The guidelines explicitly stress that food waste is a matter of sustainable development, particularly a resource problem.<sup>45</sup> As an explainer of the new recommendation on the CNS website states:

The measurements and calculations of our country's scholars show that if there was no waste, domestically the use of chemical fertilizers could be reduced by 4.59 million tonnes annually, and 31.6 billion tonnes of water used for agriculture could be saved. To cherish food and reduce waste will therefore help to alleviate the problems of domestic arable land and water resource scarcity to a large extent.<sup>46</sup>

The guidebook literature uses active constructions to place the blame for food waste directly on consumers.

When it comes to identifying the causes of these problems, two interpretive patterns appear in both policy documents and guidebooks. One is the insufficient development of eco-civilized consumption patterns and lifestyles, and the other is the spectre of wastefulness and extravagance: "Excessive consumption, luxury and waste and related phenomena continue to exist as green lifestyles and consumption patterns have not yet sufficiently taken shape. This exacerbates natural resource and environmental bottlenecks."<sup>47</sup>

Why is it that eco-civilized lifestyles and consumption patterns are not sufficiently developed, and why are some Chinese citizens wasteful? With regards to the former, policy documents usually enumerate, in great detail, how the requisite policy and market infrastructure for the proper development of eco-civilized consumption patterns and lifestyles is still lacking. More important for the

43 Central Committee and State Council 2014.

44 CNS 2016, 140–165. All translations from Chinese are by the author.

45 Comparable to the dietary guidelines of other countries, the Chinese Dietary Guidelines contain detailed recommendations about what to eat and in what quantities. With regards to meat, the environmentally most relevant food category, the guidelines recommend a consumption of no more than 280~525 g of meat per week, which would constitute a 50% reduction from the current level (see "The planet needs China to curb its appetite for meat." *The Economist*, 17 October 2019). Nevertheless, these recommendations do not markedly differ from the recommendations of other high meat-consuming nations. For comparison, the German Nutrition Society in 2019 recommended a weekly meat intake of no more than 300~600 g. Furthermore, the Chinese recommendations on what to eat are exclusively framed from a health perspective, not an environmental perspective.

46 Han 2016.

47 NDRC 2016, No. 353.

potential responsabilization of the population is what might be summed up as problems of “consciousness” (*yishi* 意识), or rather the lack thereof: “The green life consciousness of the general public is not strong, the concepts of environmental protection and collective responsibility are not genuinely established [among the population].”<sup>48</sup> This lack of a “green life consciousness” is not only an attitudinal and cognitive problem but also results in the population not engaging in eco-civilized consumption and lifestyle practices.

With regards to the “wastefulness” interpretive pattern, there are also two reasons found in the discourse: one is simple carelessness. People might be wasteful in their everyday lives because they do not think about how they could use resources more carefully, do not plan ahead or simply do not know better:

Most of the food which gets wasted has not passed its expiration date or might even still be in its original packaging. And then there are food leftovers – 90 per cent of consumers do not realize how much food they throw away every day. People always have big eyes and small stomachs, they buy a lot and then, when they cannot eat it, they throw it away.<sup>49</sup>

People’s wastefulness with resources might also be the result of a deeper moral failure, namely a mindset that values luxury and social comparison and which expresses these through wastefulness:

Nowadays, there is a minority of people who regard luxury as a fashion and waste as ostentation, and they do not know what simplicity is. The negative publicity of any kind of top-notch consumption, royal pleasures, aristocratic feasts and so on, reels these feeble-willed people in, for their so-called status they are extravagant without measure.<sup>50</sup>

### *Solutions and model practices: building eco-civilized food consumption practices*

The policy documents recognize a wide range of problems in connection to policy and market infrastructure and so formulate many solutions in this direction. For example, with regards to food waste, the government resolves to “formulate catering industry service regulations, accelerate the establishment of a sound catering industry standard system and work ... to study and establish a reward and punishment system for the catering industry to combat food waste.”<sup>51</sup>

More importantly, policy documents also target the population’s behaviour, asserting that eco-friendly lifestyles and consumption patterns need to be promoted within the population: “the formation on a fundamental level of frugal, green, low-carbon, civilized and healthy lifestyles and consumption patterns” is to be achieved through a comprehensive line-up of propaganda and educational measures that aim to raise consciousness, influence the population’s consumption attitudes, knowledge and behaviour.<sup>52</sup> If adopting eco-friendly lifestyles and consumption patterns is the way forward, then defining what counts as such is crucial. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) provides the following definition in its “Guiding opinions on advancing green consumption”:

Green consumption means consumption behaviour that is characterized by natural resource conservation and environmental protection. It mainly manifests in holding high frugality, reducing losses and waste and in choosing highly efficient and eco-friendly products and services. This reduces resource use and pollution discharge in the process of consumption.<sup>53</sup>

48 MEE 2015, No. 135.

49 Xu 2012, 183.

50 Ibid., 175.

51 Central Committee and State Council 2014.

52 NDRC 2016, No. 353.

53 Ibid.



When it comes to breaking this down to food and eating habits, policy documents sometimes use general terms such as “low carbon diet” (*ditan yinshi* 低碳饮食)<sup>54</sup> or “scientific and civilized food and beverage consumption patterns” (*kexue wenming de canyin xiaofei moshi* 科学文明的餐饮消费模式) but do not define these terms clearly.<sup>55</sup> Instead, they promote a whole host of concrete suggestions, such as “eating a reasonable and healthy diet and minimizing the frequency of tableware replacement”<sup>56</sup> or “increasing vegetarian food, eating more seasonal food.”<sup>57</sup> How “minimizing the frequency of tableware replacement” is related to energy conservation and emissions reduction (the topic of the policy document which makes this suggestion) remains unclear. Consumer guidebooks fill in the blanks and specify what eco-civilized food consumption practices are. One guidebook defines the term “green diet” (*luse yinshi* 绿色饮食) in the following way:

Green diet is a general designation for a diet which has satisfying one’s dietary needs as its basic requirement and which accords with both physical health and environmental protection. Its meaning is relatively broad. It encompasses both consuming green, environmentally friendly foods as well as green dietary habits. Choosing green and organic food is an important aspect of it. At the same time, cultivating good dietary habits is also an important aspect, such as not eating over-processed foods, clearing one’s plate and eliminating food waste, choosing low carbon, environment-friendly cooking methods, resolutely not buying and eating rare plants and animals, etc.<sup>58</sup>

Following the NDRC definition of green consumption given above, I classified the practices I found described in the material into three sets of (not mutually exclusive) practices. The first category includes habits of a frugal, conserving and overall civilized lifestyle, such as using low-carbon and resource-efficient cooking methods or re/using one’s own lunch containers and drinking bottles, etc. The second category includes practices that aim to reduce waste of various kinds, such as not using disposable items or buying excessively packaged goods and, most importantly, reducing food waste. The third category refers to buying green products, such as low-carbon and resource-efficient kitchen appliances, including stoves, refrigerators and ovens. A suggestion seldom made in policy documents, but which frequently appears in guidebooks, is to buy food that is labelled as “green food” (a Chinese product standard) or as organic and to buy local and seasonal food. While policy documents only mention such practices in passing, guidebooks provide great detail on how to follow them. One guidebook includes several pages on resource-saving ways of preparing food, telling its readers, for instance, to put on the lid when frying or boiling food and to soak grains and beans to reduce cooking times.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the large number of suggestions made, it is important to stress that the paramount concern, especially in policy documents, is with reducing consumer food waste. The NDRC’s “Guiding opinions on advancing green consumption” dedicates a long and detailed paragraph on how to reduce food waste at official business dinners, festive occasions and in the home, presenting suggestions such as charging for meals on a pay-per-weight basis, restaurant staff prompting customers to order an appropriate amount of dishes, and families being more mindful when buying food.<sup>60</sup> A characteristic that unites all these practices is that they are considered to be small, convenient adjustments to one’s lifestyle and consumption behaviour: “the habit of a green lifestyle is gradually cultivated, starting with small actions.”<sup>61</sup> The actions are so small that they might even focus on “saving

54 NDRC 2014, No. 2347.

55 NDRC 2016, No. 353.

56 BMPG 2011, No. 76.

57 SMPG 2012, No. 21.

58 MEP and CSES 2015, 38.

59 Xu 2012, 127–134.

60 NDRC 2016, No. 353.

61 MEE 2015, No. 135.

a drop of water, one piece of paper, one grain of rice, and one kilowatt-hour of electricity.”<sup>62</sup> Despite their size, they are described as civilized (*wenming* 文明) and work towards building an eco-civilization.

### *Consumer subjects: green consumer-citizens*

The eco-civilization discourse delineates a clear distribution of responsibility between the different actors, often expressed in slogans such as “government leads, market responds, public participates.”<sup>63</sup> It is the government’s role to undertake the ideological work, issue the right policies, model the way through its own public procurement and guide the population through propaganda and education. The population has the task of participating (*gongzhong canyu* 公众参与), by displaying the right eco-civilized consciousness and greening food consumption practices. Unsurprisingly, the guidebook literature focuses most on consumer responsibility. It emphasizes both how consumers contribute to environmental problems and how important their role is in solving them: “From getting out of bed in the morning to going to sleep at night, how much carbon does a person emit in one day? According to statistics, the average annual carbon emissions of a Chinese citizen is 4.1 tonnes.”<sup>64</sup> People’s everyday behaviour is ecologically highly relevant and their role in building China’s eco-civilization is accordingly large.

Neither the policy documents nor the guidebook literature addresses the huge socio-economic differences, which are obscured by averages. Policy documents only discuss a general category of Chinese consumer and make no socio-economic differentiation. The guidebook literature, for its part, is aimed at a particular, socio-economically privileged readership. Judging from the assumptions that these texts make and the examples they offer, it is evident that they address an urban, middle-class and female readership. The readers of these books are responsible for grocery shopping and food preparation in the family. Pregnancy is a concern for them, and they take care of infants and small children. They buy food from markets and are assumed to have little to no knowledge of food production. They are assumed to have the means to buy eco-labelled products as well as the time, energy and education to delve deeply into matters of environmental protection and eco-labelling.

In accordance with the way policy documents allocate responsibility between the state and population, they (and, to a lesser degree, the guidebooks) sketch out a consumer subject who expresses governmental, not popular, responsibility: the mobilized green agent. As the name implies, these consumer subjects first need to be mobilized (*dongyuan* 动员) before they will do what is expected of them. Policy documents perpetually refer to propaganda and education (*xuanchuan jiaoyu* 宣传教育) as measures of choice. The mobilized green agent subject is evident in statements such as: “deepening environmental education, cultivating green citizens.”<sup>65</sup> Mobilized green agents are motivated to act through modelling: they adopt the correct behaviour, which is modelled for them in propaganda and education. For this reason, exemplary models (*dianxing shifan* 典型示范) constitute an important conduit for disseminating the proper attitudes and practices to the mobilized consumer. The models can differ – for example, model experiences, model organizations, model groups, model products or model personalities. The Party and government are, of course, assigned a model role, but so, too, are youth and public figures. Closely related to the praise lavished on social models is the censure of social shaming and social pressure: in order to “create a conducive social atmosphere,” policy documents explicitly encourage subjects to “strengthen the supervisory role of public opinion and expose extravagant consumption behaviour.”<sup>66</sup>

62 NDRC 2012, No. 194.

63 MEE 2015, No. 135.

64 Xu 2012, 16.

65 MEE 2015, No. 135.

66 NDRC 2016, No. 353.

Closely related to the mobilized green agent is the subject position of the green consumer-citizen, the dominant consumer subject in the guidebook literature. This subjectivity constitutes a form of consumer citizenship in that green consumer-citizens fulfil their civic duty primarily through lifestyle and consumption practices, rather than, for example, political participation in decision making. In a sense, responsible green consumer-citizens are the product of civic education and propaganda efforts, and they accept and perform their duties accordingly. In so doing, they display a variety of characteristics. They work on cultivating the right attitude, which includes understanding the importance of environmental action and developing a sense of personal responsibility to follow such actions, cultivating a proper sense of morality and valuing frugality (*jiejian* 节俭 or *jieyue* 节约), and developing the ability to act in a self-conscious, self-disciplined and prospective manner.

They are above all else moral agents: “To conserve is glorious, to waste is disgraceful” (*jieyue guangrong, langfei kechi* 节约光荣、浪费可耻) is an oft repeated phrase and an example of how the eco-civilization discourse closely links environmental values with personal virtue and quality. Being wasteful is thus seen as a sign of low quality. The moral struggle and moral panic related to distinguishing right from wrong behaviour is especially apparent in the language used to describe the necessity of protecting the susceptible minds of young people:

[We must] guide young people to establish a value outlook of frugality and a green, environmentally protecting aesthetic sentiment from when they are still children, and strengthen them to resist the eroding power of the mistaken zeitgeist of excessive consumption, and of harmful thinking such as consumerism and hedonism.<sup>67</sup>

Green consumer-citizens are motivated to act because it is their civic duty: “[China’s environmental problems] require that [all of us] Chinese citizens participate and use [our] actions to change our way of life and the status quo of China’s environment!”<sup>68</sup> This language of civic duty is all pervasive: becoming a green consumer-citizen “starts with me” (*cong wo zuoqi* 从我做起) and everyone has the moral obligation to be a green consumer-citizen at all times and in all situations. The idea behind such pervasive civic duty is that if everyone “did their bit,” the effect would be large:

If every consumer consciously chooses products which are good for the environment, then these pieces of information will converge to form a signal that will guide producers and sellers to correctly walk the road of sustainable consumption.<sup>69</sup>

The third consumer subjectivity, the utility-maximizing consumer, appears solely in policy documents and is addressed only indirectly. It is, however, the corollary of solutions that involve economically incentivizing green behaviour, such as product subsidies. The utility-maximizing consumer shines through in statements such as: “The systems for energy saving and environment-friendly product certification as well as energy efficiency labelling have been implemented, thus reinforcing consumers’ willingness to buy energy-saving products.”<sup>70</sup> The notion that underlies such statements is that consumers are self-interested agents who will act in economically rational ways when choosing to buy products or adopt lifestyle habits. Environmentally friendly practices are most likely to be adopted if consumers’ environmental rationality coincides with their economic rationality, or if by expanding the calculus of rationality beyond immediate monetary gain to include personal and familial wellbeing, consumers can discern the immediate personal benefit

67 MEE 2015, No. 135.

68 FoN China, GVB and CEEC 2012, 19.

69 Hou 2013, Introduction

70 NDRC 2012, No. 194.

in engaging in such practices. It is, therefore, the government's responsibility to implement the right legal, regulatory and financial measures to bring about such a "rationality fit."

### *Responsibilization in the eco-civilization discourse*

The eco-civilization discourse contains different degrees of consumer responsibilization. As mentioned, the discourse delineates a clear distribution of responsibility between the state and consumers and attributes consumers co-responsibility in solving environmental problems. Nevertheless, in the interpretive patterns of the mobilized green agent and the utility-maximizing consumer, consumers are not directly responsibilized; instead, it is the government's job to educate and mobilize the population and implement the right policies. It is in the interpretive pattern of the green consumer-citizen that consumers are explicitly called upon to contribute as socialist consumer-citizens.

Green consumer-citizens are, above all, moral subjects and their responsibilities are mainly articulated in a moral register. For example, an action's (in)correctness is routinely evaluated on moral grounds. Correct behaviour, especially eliminating food waste, is lauded as civilized and frugal. Incorrect behaviour is criticized as wasteful and extravagant and understood to stem from greed and selfishness. This discourse, moreover, appeals to people's sense of themselves as moral persons. For instance, food waste is often calculated against the number of people who could annually be fed with the same amount of food:

From 2007 to 2008, the food protein wasted in food catering alone reached 8 million tonnes in our country, which is equivalent to the annual requirement of 260 million people. The fat wasted amounted to 3 million tonnes, which is equivalent to the annual requirement of 130 million people.<sup>71</sup>

Such statements draw on basic human solidarity and the recent memory of hunger and scarcity to create their impact, namely articulating the reprehensibility of food waste.

The frame of reference for this morality is the Chinese nation. In illustrative examples, the reference point is "our country" (*wo guo* 我国). Acting in an ecologically civilized manner is framed as a civic duty. The eco-civilization discourse, moreover, makes a cultural argument by stressing frugality as a virtue of the Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu jiejian meide* 中华民族节俭美德). The term for Chinese people used here, *Zhonghua minzu*, has a strong cultural connotation, evoking a sense of pride in China's long cultural tradition. Such an appeal to historical tradition plays on the rising cultural nationalist sentiments in contemporary China. Insofar as Chinese see themselves as moral agents who subscribe to the values of frugality, civic duty and Chinese cultural nationalism and want to act in alignment with this sense of themselves, soft steering through discourse may prove persuasive.

### *Consumer Responsibilization with Chinese Characteristics*

Scholars have shown that Chinese governmentalities are hybrid and may include neo-liberal as well as neo-socialist elements.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, it has also been shown that these governmentalities are designed to further the state's "civilizing project," which is aimed at creating a civilized population that can serve the nation.<sup>73</sup> In this vein, the rationality guiding the eco-civilization discourse on food consumption can be characterized as a civilizing governmentality. The idea of civilization is central to the discourse: the aim is to foster a civilized citizenry. As James Oswald has argued, by framing ecological problems through the lens of civilization, "there is a great emphasis on the idea of

71 MEP and CSES 2015, 46.

72 Palmer and Winiger 2019.

73 Tomba 2009, 592.

becoming ‘ecologically civilized,’ that is, that environmental problems are at their core a problem of values and that there is a moral imperative for people to become imbued with ecological values.”<sup>74</sup> To that end, the eco-civilization ideology expands the meaning of civilization to include ecological behaviour and thereby imbues such behaviour with moral valency.

As shown above, the eco-civilization discourse mainly attributes responsibility and thus tries to govern on moral grounds. The idea of “rul[ing] by virtue,” as well as the idea that the population’s virtue is integral to the well-being of the community, has roots in traditional Chinese thought, particularly in Confucianism.<sup>75</sup> Various scholars have argued that the Chinese state has long seen rule by virtue as desirable and has understood itself to have a responsibility to civilize the people for the greater good.<sup>76</sup> The eco-civilization discourse echoes many of the basic assumptions of this moral rule.<sup>77</sup> First, there is the idea that people can be transformed through education, and that the right consciousness will lead to proper behaviour. The suggestion that proper conduct is virtuous and indicative of good character, whereas improper conduct is seen as a vice that derives from character flaws such as selfishness and greed, brings to mind the traditional distinction between the noble man (*junzi* 君子) and the small man (*xiaoren* 小人). Lastly, the eco-civilization discourse reflects the belief that virtue needs to be publicly displayed for maximum effect and, relatedly, that exemplary models are central to moral education. The importance of exemplary models for governance, both in communist and post-socialist China, has been widely discussed in the Chinese studies literature.<sup>78</sup>

Børge Bakken stresses that such state-mobilized “[m]emories of the past ... return not as unreflected traditionalism, but as conscious and calculated ways of controlling the modern.”<sup>79</sup> Other scholars, too, argue that the state’s use of traditional Chinese ideas is done in a pragmatic and calculated fashion and may serve a persuasive and legitimizing function.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the cultural nationalist references in the state’s contemporary rhetoric, including in the eco-civilization discourse, serve as part of China’s strategy of soft steering, appealing to resonant cultural dispositions within the population and inflecting the global trend towards consumer responsabilization with “Chinese characteristics.”

## Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrate that China’s EA works not only through coercion but also through citizen responsabilization. The state attributes responsibility to Chinese citizens to eat in a more ecologically responsible manner through propaganda and education as a deliberate form of soft steering. The consumer guidebook literature broadcasts these state messages and elaborates on them. There is a strong congruence between these two genres. Policy documents treat the greening of food consumption on an abstract level and often remain vague – for example, “consumers should avoid food waste.” Instead, they refer to popular science material to guide and educate the population. Consumer guidebooks answer this call, at times by specifically referring to state policies in their forewords. The popular documents then operationalize the state’s eco-civilization discourse. They paint more vivid pictures of the environmental challenges, give practical, implementable advice and spell out what underdefined terms such as “low carbon diet” mean.

“Farming out the meaning making” from political actors to social actors is not uncommon in China, but it is “[m]ost often ... conducted within academia.”<sup>81</sup> By farming out meaning making to consumer guidebooks, the state arguably practises “consultative authoritarianism.” Jessica Teets

74 Oswald 2016.

75 Bakken 2000, 95.

76 Ibid.; Heberer 2023.

77 Bakken 2000.

78 See, e.g., Bakken 2000; Reed 1995.

79 Bakken 2000, 8.

80 Wu 2014.

81 Alpermann and Fröhlich 2020, 117.

develops this concept to describe how the state improves its governance by selectively allowing civil society groups to operate, even by supporting them, while simultaneously repressing such organizations if their positions do not align with its goals.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in the realm of discourse production, the state “consults” by farming out meaning making but also reserves the right to choose what is promoted to a canonical status and broadcast to the population. This is because “discursive consultation” within eco-civilization could be described as soft steering in the shadow of hierarchy.

My analysis further shows that this soft side of China’s EA sketches out a passive form of citizen co-responsibility and participation. Chinese citizens are exclusively called upon to contribute through the right kind of consumption and lifestyle practices. Active political participation is not part of the discourse. The eco-civilization discourse, moreover, conceptualizes green practices as small, convenient and routine actions than can help to tackle large ecological problems. These actions do not constitute a grand re-orientation in China’s consumer society and at no point does the discourse call for a reduction of consumption. Appeals to practise the virtue of frugality are exclusively targeted at wasteful and corrupt behaviour. Lastly, the discourse of eco-civilization outlines a cultural nationalist programme that is focused on virtue and vice and in which consumer behaviour is morally charged. Environmental protection is made a matter of civilization, and consumers are expected to cultivate themselves into models of ecological morality to fulfil their civic duty and support the state’s goal of building an ecological civilization.

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82 Teets 2014.



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**Franziska M. FRÖHLICH** is a postdoctoral scholar with the Lise Meitner Research Group "China in the Global System of Science" at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. Her research focuses on the intersection of food consumption and the environment in consumer advice as well as science communication and the popular understanding of science in China. She holds a PhD in Sinology from the University of Würzburg.