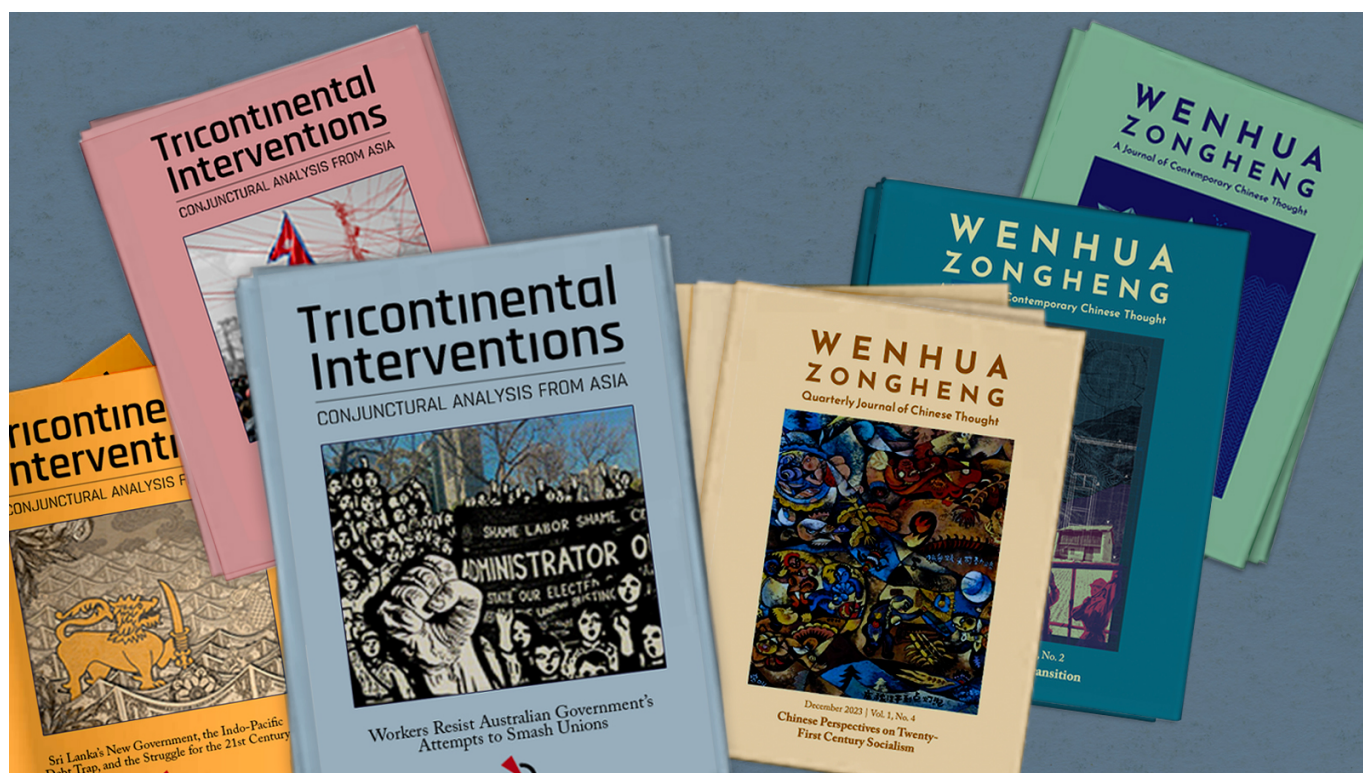


China's Path From "Airpocalypse" Towards an Ecological Civilisation: The First Asia Newsletter



Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research began its work in 2018. Over the years, we have worked to improve and clarify the way we do our research and how we present it to our community. In 2024, we brought together our researchers who specialise in Asia to form Tricontinental Asia. Our team members are from across the Asian continent, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Our work together has generated its own energy and produced a series of publications that have already been shared with many of you. These include:

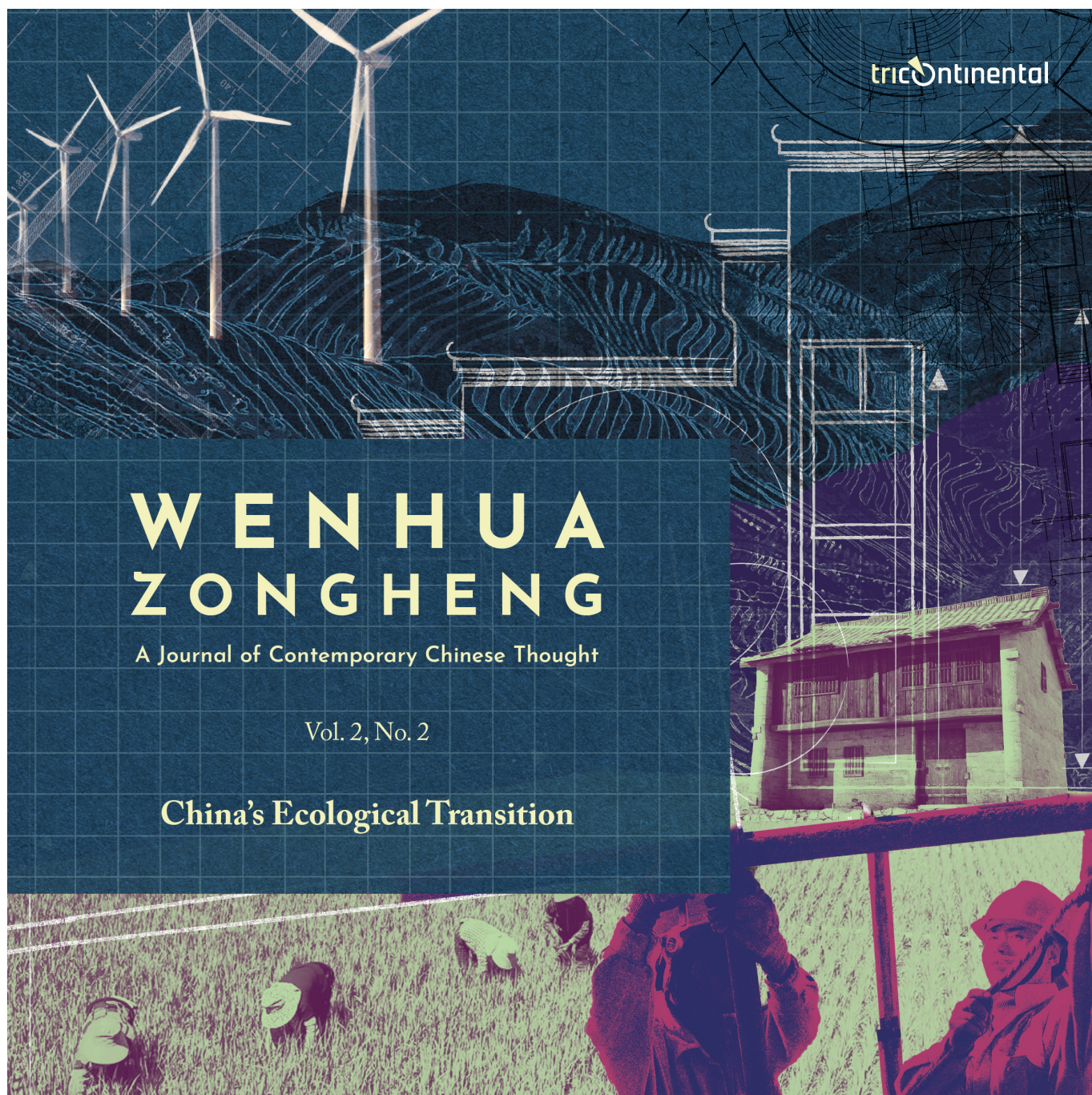
Tricontinental Interventions: Conjunctural Analysis from Asia (TICAA)

- **Nepal's Fight for Sovereignty, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the US's New Cold War against China**, no. 1, September 2024
- **Workers Resist Australian Government's Attempts to Smash Unions**, no. 2, October 2024
- **Memory and Resistance in Palestinian Art**, no. 3, November 2024
- **Sri Lanka's New Government, the Indo-Pacific Debt Trap, and the Struggle for the 21st Century**, no. 4, December 2024

Wenhua Zongheng: A Journal of Contemporary Chinese Thought

- **On the Threshold of a New International Order**, Volume 1, Issue no. 1, March 2023
- **China's Path from Extreme Poverty to Socialist Modernisation**, Volume 1, Issue no. 2, June 2023
- **China-Africa Relations in the Belt and Road Era**, Volume 1, Issue no. 3, October 2023
- **Chinese Perspectives on Twenty-First Century Socialism**, Volume 1, Issue no. 4, December 2023
- **The BRICS and De-Dollarisation: Opportunities and Challenges**, Volume 2, Issue no. 1, May 2024
- **China's Ecological Transition**, Volume 2, Issue no. 2, December 2024

We are excited to launch this newsletter to inform you about Tricontinental Asia Publications. Several of you who are getting this newsletter have subscribed to Dongsheng's *News on China* and other publications. We hope you will forgive us for bringing you onto this list, which is a logical next step from our media work focused on China to an Asia-wide project. We welcome you to subscribe to the newsletter, share it, and ask others to subscribe. Your feedback is invaluable to us. So please do not hesitate to let us know what you think about this and subsequent newsletters.



Our first newsletter introduces you to the latest issue of *Wenhua Zongheng* on ‘**China’s Ecological Transition**’.

A decade ago, China’s air pollution crisis – nicknamed the ‘airpocalypse’ – dominated global headlines, accompanied by grey-tinted photographs of children wearing protective face masks against Beijing’s bleak skyline. Owing to heavy industrial growth and lax environmental laws, these dystopic images seemed to reveal an inevitable cost and the ugly side of China’s ‘economic miracle’. Moreover, China’s post-reform economic policies, which transformed the country into the ‘factory of the world’ – accounting for nearly 30% of global manufacturing output today – indeed have come at a significant environmental cost, posing major challenges to its sustainable development..

In 2007, Pan Yue, the former vice minister of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, warned that ‘Our current economic development model is unsustainable’. During his twelve year tenure in that ministry, he charted a new and tough course for China’s environmental assessment, policies, and regulations. Pan Yue’s warning was echoed by President Xi Jinping in his 2022 report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), where he stated that China’s development was ‘imbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable’ and that ‘the traditional development model could no longer keep us moving forward’.

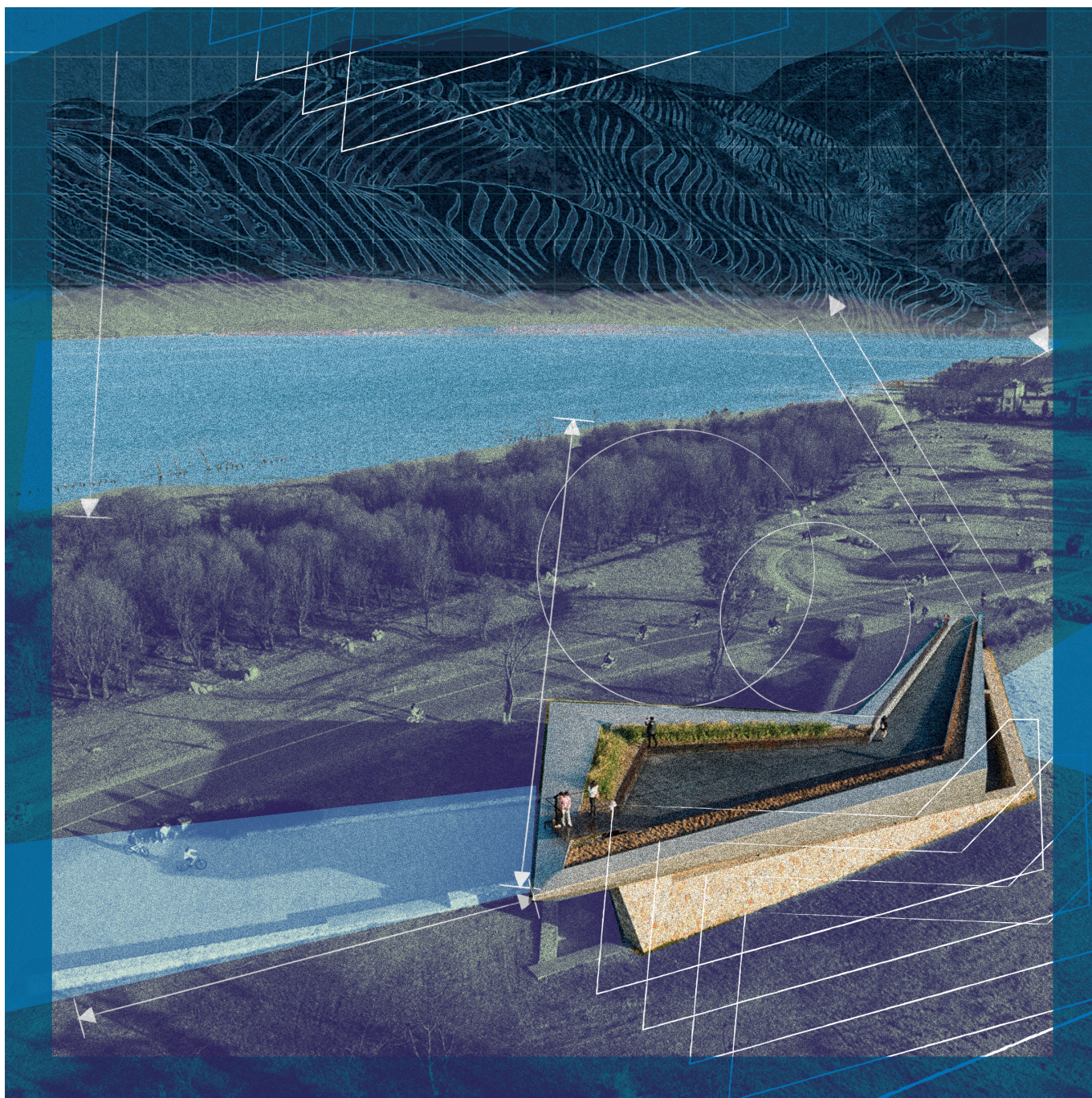
Coupled with a sharp criticism of the ‘old path of war, colonization, and plunder’ embodied by the western model of modernisation, Xi put forth the Chinese-style modernisation (中国式现代化), which contains harmony between humanity and nature as one of its five core elements. Furthermore, Xi has introduced several core visions and policy directions, from ‘ecological civilisation’ (生态文明) to ‘clear water and green mountains’ (绿水青山). Evocative as they may sound, these concepts are not easy to understand and translate outside the Chinese context. What is a possible development path for China, a historically underdeveloped country in the Global South, to simultaneously build its productive forces, fight the plagues of hunger and poverty, while protecting its land, water, and air?



This latest *Wenhua Zongheng* issue offers insights from Chinese scholars on how the country has attempted to answer this question, looking at three aspects of China's ecological restoration, agricultural production, and transition to a new energy economy. As detailed in the article that I co-wrote with Xiong Jie, the process of restoring **Erhai Lake** in southwest China required significant individual sacrifices from those whose livelihoods were based in local fishing, farming, herding, and tourism. This process also involved mobilisation of scientists and Party cadres to develop scientifically-informed policies and governance mechanisms. Ultimately, they had to build collective consensus and understanding that environmental protection is essential to the sustenance of the entire community. In Ding Ling and Xu Zhun's article about China's **agricultural production**, they highlight the enduring difficulty for a country like China, which still has 'unshakeable support' for the Green Revolution, to transition away from the exhausted model of industrialised agriculture towards a more ecological approach that can actually improve humanity's ability to feed itself.

Finally, Feng Kaidong and Chen Junting dive into the factors behind China's success in achieving large-scale industrialisation in the **NEV industry** ahead of others, while arguing for 'a new type of globalisation' in which the country's technological advances can help promote the industrialisation process in other Global South countries, so that the emerging working class in these countries can benefit from the fruits of their labour. These are but a few experiences that can be shared about China's aspiration and experiments in building an ecological civilisation.

In the decade since the 'airpocalypse', China has experienced significant transformations. After Premier Li Keqiang declared a 'war against pollution', the harmful particulate matter (PM2.5) saw a drop of 42.3% between 2013 and 2021, equivalent to what the US achieved in three decades, according to a University of Chicago study. Impressively, the air quality improvements increased the average Chinese citizen's lifespan by 2.2 years. China has become the global leader in reforestation since 2000, creating nearly **one third** of the world's increase in planted forests, coupled with the anti-poverty efforts that generated over **400,000 jobs** in environmental conservation.



In 2020, Xi made the ambitious pledge of reaching a carbon emissions peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060. Combined with the pledge, China has made extensive investment and incentives to develop renewable energy equipment and technologies. According to the Global Energy Monitor's **report**, as of June 2024, China is home to two thirds (339 GW) of the world's utility-scale solar and wind power under construction, trailed by the United States (40 GW), Brazil (13 GW), and the United Kingdom (10 GW). In 2024, China produced over a record-breaking ten million EVs.

While enormous advances have been made to steer the country towards an ecological civilisation, by rectifying the past damages and de-addicting the economy from fossil fuels, it is still a far cry from what is needed to confront the climate catastrophe that the planet and humanity are facing, to which China is not immune. In the first six months of 2024 alone, the country faced a series of natural disasters, including cold spells,

landslides, and flooding along the Yellow River, which, cumulatively affected 32.4 million people and claimed 322 lives. The World Bank notes that China's **vulnerability** to climatic hazards is high, even in proportion to its large size and economy, incurring annual economic loss of US \$76 billion, with nearly a third of its agricultural land susceptible to natural disasters like storms, droughts, floods, and landslides. Last week's 6.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) had a devastating impact, resulting in 126 deaths, impacting over 61,500 people, and damaging 27,248 homes.

As Fidel Castro warned in his speech at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992: 'An important biological species is in danger of disappearing due to the rapid, progressive destruction of its natural living conditions: the human being. We are now aware of this issue, though it is almost too late to prevent it'. That warning has only become more pressing over three decades later. Undoubtedly, due to the sheer scale and size, the direction that China takes is decisive to the future of this planet and our species. However, this task is not China's alone. This issue of *Wenhua Zongheng* invites you to study, debate, and discuss some of the country's hard-earned lessons, mistakes, achievements, and explorations in building a new development path that seeks harmony between humans and the planet. We hope you do enjoy it.

Warmly,

Tings Chak

Tricontinental Asia