China’s Experience and Prospects for Sustainable Development

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Abstract—By the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the main obstacle to China’s economic growth was the large-scale destruction of natural complexes and the inefficient use of resources. China was among the first countries that expressed willingness to follow the UN strategy proclaimed at the Conference in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and adopted the concept of sustainable development. The main distinguishing feature of the national concept of sustainable development is the rejection of the idea of limiting economic growth. Thirty years later, we can see not just success but also changing models of economic development, their focus on resource conservation, and accounting for the environmental component. China’s experience in practice proves that rapid industrial growth can be accompanied by a balanced development of three areas: the economy, society, and the environment.

Keywords: China, sustainable development, environment

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In the second half of the 20th century, Western scientists, concerned about the crisis state of the environment, put forward a theory of the development of society that included the principle of zero growth of the economy and population. A kind of compromise in relation to the zero-growth model was the principle of low economic growth rates (according to this theory, GDP growth rates should not exceed 2–3% per year). However, China, according to the Chinese scientist Lu Dadao, cannot accept the model of low economic growth rates or, even more so, the model of zero economic growth [1].

If both developed and developing economies adhered to the concept of zero growth to preserve the environment, this would serve to deepen the inequality between them and the conservation of poverty and backwardness of most countries [2]. None of the developing countries accepted the theory of global equilibrium, containing the principle of zero growth as a guide to action.

At the same time, the concept of sustainable development can be viewed as a kind of compromise between further economic growth and environmental conservation. Unlike the theory of global equilibrium put forward by the Club of Rome, sustainable development does not imply the abandonment of economic growth. We can say that the central idea of this concept is development, improving the quality of life, and eliminating poverty and the gap in the conditions of the existence of the rich North and the poor South. It is another matter that the achievement of these goals should include minimization of damage and costs for the environment. The fundamental idea of the concept of sustainable development lies in the comprehensive solution of economic, social, and environmental problems.

The draft concept of sustainable development, voiced and adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro), did not reject economic growth, while the problem of inequality of different countries in the level of development was almost in the foreground. Since what was meant was a steadily developing world community and not just rich Western countries, the problem of inequality could supposedly be solved if the economic growth of the Third World countries continued and was not conserved. It was only necessary to change the qualitative parameters of this growth. The idea of a certain redistribution of resources in favor of the poor South was also put forward. The concept of sustainable development seems to be fairer in relation to the countries of the Third World and, undoubtedly, much more attractive for China.

It is worth paying special attention to the fact that China, due to the specifics of its historical development and, above all, the demographic situation, ear-
lier than other countries, namely by the end of the 20th century, largely came close to the limit of using natural resources and of anthropogenic pressure on the environment. The situation prevailing in China by that time was a kind of gigantic experiment set by the very course of the history of that country—an experiment the results of which can help humanity in search for ways out of the global crisis [3, p. 23].

ADOPTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

The PRC government attached great importance to the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development. The Chinese side delivered a report on China’s population, environment, and development, consonant with the name of the conference and in fact reflecting the main socioecological and economic problems [4]. Noteworthy are the subheadings (sections) of the report, which practically formulate and reflect the relevant issues. Let us mention some of them [5].

1. Atmospheric pollution caused by burning coal continues to be a serious problem, as it seems difficult to change the energy mix based on coal.

2. Controlling industrial pollution is a difficult task. In the near future, it is hardly possible to change radically the lag in the field of pollution control.

3. Because of the continuing tension between rapid urbanization and the backward infrastructure of cities, the quality of the environment in cities may improve in part, but it is difficult to talk about improvement in general.

Thus, the representatives of China, noting the seriousness of the environmental problems inherent in China, had to admit that the country lags far behind the developed countries in their solution. The report also noted the technological backwardness of Chinese industry. The technical equipment of most industrial enterprises at that time corresponded to the level of the 1950s–1960s. The consequence of this was high energy and resource intensity; low efficiency; and absence or inefficiency of treatment facilities, which led to a high level of pollutant emissions into the environment. The re-equipment of enterprises, the construction of treatment facilities, and the implementation of projects on environmental protection require significant costs. Meanwhile, state appropriations for these purposes amounted to only 0.7% of GDP at that time [6, pp. 40–43], and it was impossible to increase them, primarily due to the low per capita GDP.

The report noted China’s high international debt, which did not allow for finding funds for the technical re-equipment of industry, estimated by experts at 200 bln yuan [5]. This was followed by the conclusion that, from a financial point of view, China could not afford a large-scale introduction of the achievements of science and technology, which could significantly change the situation with environmental pollution [5].

In general, the report that China’s representatives presented at the conference in Rio evaluated the environmental and economic situation in the country rather pessimistically. On the one hand, the Chinese side recognized the seriousness of the situation and was open about its concern about this. On the other hand, one could feel that China was somewhat confused and was counting on the help of the world community, as if recognizing the difficulty of solving this problem on its own.

One of the most important results of the UN conference was the adoption, among several others, of Agenda 21, prepared by the UN Commission on Environment and Development. The agenda relied on the concept of sustainable development and offered an integrated approach and a wide range of measures to streamline the society–economy–environment system. The document specifically spelled out the main areas of activity related to all spheres of society, which could help countries at different levels of development find their way into the new century [7]. The conference made an appeal to all countries of the world to recognize Agenda 21 as a fundamental document and to promote the implementation of the provisions of the concept of sustainable development in their programs of socioeconomic development. China was the first state to express its readiness to follow the concept of sustainable development [4] and immediately adopted it as the basis of national economic growth plans. In 1992, the country’s government issued ten decrees that oriented China towards achieving sustainable development goals [8]. At the same time, almost all government ministries and departments of the country began working on national Agenda 21.

The decision to establish China’s Agenda 21, the White Paper on China’s Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century (or White Paper for short), was made at the 23rd session of the Committee on Environmental Protection of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on June 2, 1992. The working group for the preparation of the document was headed by the State Planning Commission and the State Committee for Science and Technology; it included 52 ministries and departments (agencies), as well as public organizations [4]. The draft document, formed by April 1993, included 40 chapters. After discussion and introduction of amendments and additions, received not only from Chinese ministries and departments but also from foreign experts, work on the document was completed. The UN Development Program (UNDP) provided financial and consulting assistance in the development of China’s Agenda 21 [4], which was approved at a session of the Executive Committee of the PRC State Council on March 25, 1994 [9]. The final version of
the document contains 20 chapters and defines 78 programs, covering various activities.

The 20 chapters of the document can roughly be divided into four main areas. The first one is devoted to defining a general strategy for China’s sustainable development (Chapters 1 to 3, as well as 5, 6, and 20). The second direction deals with various aspects of the sustainable development of society (Chapters 7 to 10 and Chapter 17); the third, with issues of sustainable development of the economy (Chapters 4, 11, 12, and 13); and the fourth is directly related to the rational use of natural resources and environmental protection (Chapters 14, 15, 16, 18, and 19) [4].

An addition to and an integral part of China’s Agenda 21 was the Priority Program, which defines the main directions of movement along the path to sustainable development [10]. That program involved solving urgent problems in areas such as population optimization; conservation of natural resources and the environment; and development, education, and raising the level of consciousness of citizens [10]. The sustainable development strategy formed the basis for the correction of state plans in the economic and social spheres.

On March 17, 1996, the 4th session of the 9th National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China adopted the Fundamentals of the Ninth Five-Year Plan for the Social and Economic Development of the Country and Long-Term Objectives for 2010. That document approved sustainable development as a guiding principle for the country, and decisions on the implementation of this strategy were made and clearly defined [11]. Taking China’s Agenda 21 as a basis, many provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities began to develop their own local action plans. Various ministries worked in the same direction in the areas for which they were responsible [11].

THE CHINESE INTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Note that the Chinese interpretation of the main idea of the sustainable development concept is rather specific and quite different from the “orthodox” one. The Conference in Rio de Janeiro had recognized the possibility of further economic growth only with a number of reservations and restrictions. There were warnings about unbridled economic growth. It recognized as one of the fundamental requirements of the new model of the development of civilization that the world community should reject the economic stereotype in which unlimited economic growth to improve the living standards of the population was regarded as progress. Nevertheless, in its national sustainable development program, China highlights the task of further economic growth at a high rate of 8–9% of GDP per year [4].

This position was substantiated as follows [12]:

China is a developing state; therefore, the task of development is in the foreground. Without economic development, there are no material opportunities for the implementation of environmental protection policy or its creative transformation. As with other developing countries, rapid economic development is a matter of particular concern and the most urgent need for the PRC. Only under the conditions of accelerated stable economic development can one acquire the ability to protect and improve effectively the environmental conditions both in China and around the world.

The Chinese understanding of the idea of sustainable development can be illustrated by the National Report on Sustainable Development [11], prepared in 1997 for the next UN conference on environment and development. According to it, social and economic development is the cornerstone of sustainable development. Historical experience shows that sustainable development cannot be achieved if the people live in backwardness and poverty. China must firmly consider the development of the national economy as a priority and a task of the highest importance, with the aim of eradicating poverty and raising the living standards of the people. Economic development is the material basis for any undertakings in the country and is a fundamental guarantee of achieving the interdependence of problems relating to the population, resources, environment, and economy [11].

In the first years after the adoption of the concept, economic growth was provided mainly due to the former outdated industrial base with extremely high energy and resource intensity. Consequently, economic development had to be carried out predominantly according to a resource-intensive, environmentally destructive model. Does such a practice not contradict the very idea of China’s acceptance of the concept of sustainable development?

The national theoretical model of sustainable development assumed a certain sequence of stages. In accordance with it, the initial stage, indeed, is associated with an increase in the burden on the environment. However, thanks to this, additional funds should appear in the country’s budget, primarily for the technical re-equipment of industry, which will be carried out on the basis of modern environmental safety requirements [13]. These funds will also make it possible to raise the living standards of the population and carry out environmental protection measures. In the meantime, the situation with population growth was expected to stabilize (control of population growth was included in China’s sustainable development plans) [4]. Upon completion of the first stage of transformations, China was expected to move to a type of sustainable development close to the classical Western models [14].
The question arises whether China is following the path previously covered by developed countries: first, the predatory exploitation of natural resources in the interests of economic growth, then environmental protection with the use of accumulated capital? The difference largely lies in the fact that in the West, after the adoption of the concept of sustainable development, the environmental component has been recognized as one of the main priorities; it is included in the plans for socioeconomic development and largely determines its prospects. China adheres to its own national model of sustainable development, the priority of which is still economic growth. At the same time, budget allocations for nature protection in a fairly short period of time (1993—1999) increased from 0.7 to 1.1% of GDP [15]. According to this indicator, China quickly caught up with the developed countries of the world, where 1–2% of GDP is spent on environmental protection [6]. In the 1990s, China managed to carry out an accelerated renewal and modernization of fixed assets, and there was a tendency towards the growth of the service sector. Its share in the last decade of the 20th century increased from 31.3 to 34.0%, which further led to the servicization of the Chinese economy and a decrease in the burden on the environment [16].

The entrance onto the path of sustainable development, as Zhou Ji writes in his article [17], marked a fundamentally new stage in the history of China. The White Paper notes that at this stage a new model of socioeconomic development is being created, designed to replace previous models that do not meet the requirements of sustainability. The country was undergoing a radical restructuring in two directions. One of them is the transition from a planned economic system to a market socialist economy. The other is the transformation of the extensive model of economic growth into an intensive one.

During the reforms, it was important for the developers of the Chinese version of sustainable development to coordinate economic and social dynamics with the sustainable use of natural resources and environmental protection in such a way that current development provided the foundations for the future [18]. The sustainable use of natural resources and the maintenance of viable ecosystems are identified as the two most important pillars of sustainable development.

Considerable importance was attached to raising the level of competence of citizens. The Chinese National Report on Sustainable Development in 1997 stated that special attention should be paid to the alignment of public consciousness with the sustainable development strategy [11]. It was about introducing into the mass consciousness a holistic perception and understanding of the relationship between man and nature. The established stereotypes of production and consumption and the established way of thinking were supposed to be changed in accordance with new values, the basis of which is the concept of sustainable development.

In the West, back in the 1970s, serious attention was paid to environmental problems, while in China in those years only the first steps were taken in this direction, very modest funds were allocated for environmental purposes, and this did not bring visible results. The turning point came in the early 1980s. It was then that environmental protection was officially declared an element of state policy, and the principle of coordination of three benefits—economic, social, and environmental, all three being recognized as equally significant [19, p. 40]—was proclaimed and began to be applied in practice. This principle is so consonant with the main idea of the concept of sustainable development that it can serve as a key to its understanding up to the present day. The advancing of the principle of reconciling the three benefits at that time meant that the tasks of preserving and restoring the environment were declared by the country’s leadership to be as important as the economic tasks.

The Chinese government sought to accelerate the transformation of the economic growth model and to introduce the latest scientific and technological achievements. A series of strategic principles and measures followed, aimed at mutually coordinating the goals of economic and social development to conserve natural resources and the environment. Attempts to use an integrated approach to solving the problems of unified development of various spheres of society’s life were clearly traced. However, in practice, environmental policy and measures to combat the destruction and pollution of the environment remained only a separate area of state policy; their linkage to the economic and social spheres was very relative. Nevertheless, China’s state policy, aimed at preserving the natural environment, is distinguished by rationality and non-standard approaches. Elements of the environmental policy later formed an organic whole with the concept of sustainable development, and the very fact of their existence contributed to its adoption.

Since the 1980s, the features of environmental policy in China have been determined by the following components:

• a well-developed legal framework;
• creation and development of a system of state supervision over the state of the environment;
• scientific and technical support of environmental protection issues (including scientific research);
• state financing of environmental protection measures;
• working with the population to change the psychology of people and their attitude toward the environment.

All these areas are reflected in the White Paper, and the chapters on environmental protection are largely
based on discussion of them. Let us take a closer look at the components listed above.

### CHANGES IN ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION IN CHINA UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The foundations of China’s environmental legislation were laid down in the 1980s, and the principles that determined environmental policy are reflected in the country’s Constitution and in the Law on Environmental Protection [19, pp. 10, 48]. The Chinese legal system contains a number of nonstandard approaches to solving environmental problems. When implementing the concept of sustainable development, one of the main tasks was the revision and amendment of the legislation in accordance with the new principles [8].

Among the advantages of China’s environmental legislation is its universality: it turns out to be acceptable under the existence of two sectors of the economy that are fundamentally different in terms of methods and management structure—public and private. The legislation provides for various ways of influencing those on whom the state of the environment in China primarily depends: officials at various levels and heads of state enterprises, on the one hand, and owners of private enterprises, on the other.

Sanctions such as removal from office and confiscation of personal property turn out to be the most effective against the heads of state-owned enterprises. As for the heads and owners of private enterprises, other methods of regulation are used. The laws provide for significant penalties for environmental damage. This does not worry the heads of state-owned enterprises, who pay the fine not out of their own pocket, but for private entrepreneurs such a measure turns out to be effective. In the Chinese system of penalties, the principle “He who polluted, he puts in order” applies, and the funds that violators have to invest in the elimination of the consequences of pollution produced by their enterprises can often exceed the amount of the fine by many times [12].

Note that in practice approaches to influencing private entrepreneurs were not always effective: first, due to the weak development of the environmental pollution control system and, second, due to low tax rates [20]. The main emphasis was placed on penalties, but as for incentive measures (preferential targeted lending to companies, tax breaks for those companies that use advanced environmental technologies), before the adoption of the concept of sustainable development, Chinese environmental policy practically did not provide for them.

The White Paper developed incentive methods in detail, which became an addition to the fines, sanctions, and prescriptions of the current legislation. Among the incentives are the following:

- a system of tax incentives for entrepreneurs and enterprises on various activities that meet the interests of environmental conservation [11];
- providing more attractive interest rates for loans allocated to environmental protection projects, as well as those based on the use and promotion of modern advanced technologies;
- state encouragement of local authorities and enterprises to expand the use of foreign capital in solving problems related to environmental protection [11].

In the 1980s, when the foundations of environmental legislation were laid, most Chinese enterprises remained old-style industries corresponding to the extensive economic model. At the same time, efforts were made to ensure that all new enterprises were built considering, among other things, environmental requirements. In China, not a single factory can be built without a preliminary environmental review of the project [19, p. 66]. Seemingly, this gives certain guarantees that enterprises that do not meet modern requirements will not be built. Nevertheless, in special economic zones where intensive industrial construction was going on, this principle was often violated, and the technologies used by new enterprises did not meet environmental requirements [19, p. 18]. As a result, economic growth was accompanied by a multifold increase in environmental pollution. Despite the fact that the Law on Environmental Protection prohibits imports of environmentally imperfect equipment from abroad, additional legal mechanisms were required for establishing environmental control over special economic zones and open ports. In 1986, the Rules for the Management and Control of Environmental Protection in Areas Open to Foreign Investment were adopted [19, p. 101].

After the UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro, China revised a number of laws aimed at preventing environmental destruction and pollution. They included the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Conservation of Water and Soil Resources, the Law of the Land Administration of the People’s Republic of China, and the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Prevention and Control of Air Pollution. The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Agriculture, the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Agricultural Technology, and the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Control and Prevention of Pollution of the Environment with Solid Waste were also issued [11].

China’s Law on the Prevention and Control of Air Pollution was revised and promulgated in a new version, which provided a pilot approach to the step-by-step strengthening of the control of air pollutant emissions in cities based on a licensing system. In 2000, it was revised again to tighten penalties [20]. Concrete actions were taken to implement the provisions of the
Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the Montreal Protocol to reduce the production and use of ozone-depleting substances. The Chinese government attaches great importance to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. China has taken an active part in the activities to implement the provisions of the convention and is taking measures to prevent an increase in greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere [11].

In connection with the adoption of the concept of sustainable development, the legislation related to the control of the pollution of the seas and the coastal zone was improved [11]. According to the regulations adopted, marine ecosystems, fish resources, and endangered marine species were placed under protection; to this end, the boundaries of marine nature reserves were determined. Environmental monitoring intensified, which helped improve the protection of the coastal zone. Work was carried out on the so-called sustainable use of marine resources, and a strategy for their artificial restoration was applied (artificial breeding of fish, shrimp, oysters, seaweed, etc.) [11].

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA AT THE PRESENT STAGE

In the third decade of the 21st century, China remains the “world factory”; the country’s nominal GDP increased by almost ten times from 2000 to 2019 with relatively low inflation [21]. Although the situation in the environmental sphere of the country remains difficult, an environmental catastrophe on a planetary scale due to the fault of China, predicted at the turn of the century, has not happened. The concept of sustainable development and the use of international experience in solving problems of the economy, the social sphere, and the environment contributed to a better understanding and development of effective approaches in all these areas. As noted above, the concept of sustainable development was in tune with China’s state policy and has become an organic part of the country’s economic development plans, poverty eradication, overcoming the technological gap, and nature conservation.

In September 2019, the Progress Report on the implementation of China’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was presented at the UN Headquarters. This document was integrated into China’s 13th Five-Year Plan, which was implemented from 2016 to 2020 and is being updated and continued in the current 14th Five-Year Plan. To turn the concept into action, the Chinese leadership has taken a comprehensive approach based on comprehensive development strategies, interdepartmental coordination, and pilot projects of innovative solutions. For example, in early 2016, an interdepartmental coordination mechanism was established with the participation of 45 government departments; 17 goals and 169 tasks were distributed among different departments according to their administrative responsibilities [22].

S.S. Roach, a Senior Fellow at Yale University, holds the following opinion [23]:

To its credit, China is focusing on sustainable development at a point when its per capita output is barely more than one-third the level in the so-called advanced economies. A relatively poor country has made a conscious choice to shift its focus from the quantity of economic growth to its quality.

In the here and now of climate change, it is easy to lose sight of important signs of progress. China, the world’s biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, is a case in point. By changing its economic model, shifting its sources of fuel, developing new transportation systems, and embracing eco-friendly urbanization, China’s sustainability strategy is an example of global leadership that the rest of the world should consider very carefully.

In discussions of the Chinese model of sustainable development, the social component invariably comes to the fore. The economic recovery has lifted about 700 million people out of poverty in China, and the country is working to provide the remaining 50 million poor with a decent standard of living through targeted policy measures [22]. China committed to eradicating extreme poverty by 2020, but the pandemic crisis has changed the world’s antipoverty plans, exacerbating unemployment and inequality. An important social task of sustainable development in China is still to reduce the gap between the urban and rural populations and between different regions in terms of infrastructure development, along with expanding the social security network and improving the universal civil service.

The turn of China towards sustainable development in the late 1990s was largely associated with the catastrophic situation in the ecological state of the agricultural sector and, consequently, with the threat to food security. By the mid-1990s, the cumulative impact of inefficient and unsustainable agricultural practices and overexploitation of natural resources had caused widespread land degradation, resulting in droughts and floods, numerous losses, and rural poverty. Starting from 1998, the state dramatically increased investment in sustainable rural development. Prior to 2015, more than $350 billion was invested in 16 programs to improve more than 620 million hectares, that is, 65% of China’s arable area [24].

The results of the programs implemented in agriculture were generally assessed as positive. Deforestation has been reduced, and now forests cover 22% of the country. Meadows have expanded and recovered. Desertification has been reversed in many areas. Even though the expansion of deserts is largely attributed to climate change, land restoration efforts have proven effective. Soil erosion has been significantly reduced, sedimentation in water bodies has decreased, and the
quality of water in rivers has noticeably improved. Agricultural productivity has increased owing to increased labor efficiency and technological progress, and famine in rural areas has been largely overcome [24].

The concept of ecological civilization is enshrined in China’s Constitution, and society is forming an attitude towards natural resources as “priceless assets.” In response to climate change, the Chinese government is developing low-carbon industries, such as renewable energy, and creating “low-carbon cities” with clean transportation. However, China cannot yet abandon the traditionally high dependence of energy on coal. It is the high share of coal in the energy balance that is the main cause of air pollution in Chinese cities. The share of coal in electricity generation decreased from 72.9% in 2000 to 68.6% in 2019 [25]. Coal is gradually being replaced by new energy sources that have been developing especially actively in the last decade: nuclear energy (5%), wind generators (5%), solar panels (3%), and biofuels (2%) [26]. One of the important tasks is the implementation of a long-term plan, which will supposedly bring China to first place in the world in the production of electricity at nuclear power plants by 2030. The development of nuclear energy is in line with the Chinese strategy for sustainable development and makes it possible to overcome resource scarcity and atmospheric pollution and to resist climate change [27].

Anthropogenic air pollution has been a serious problem in Chinese cities. A significant risk to human health is the content of fine suspended particles in the air with a size of less than 2.5 μm (PM 2.5). According to official measurements carried out in Beijing on January 12, 2013, the content of PM 2.5 then reached a record 993 μg per cubic meter compared to the maximum recommended by WHO 25 PM 2.5 [26]. However, by 2020, as noted in the report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, air quality in Chinese cities improved markedly. There was a significant reduction in emissions of major air pollutants, and the national average concentration of PM 2.5 was 33 μg per cubic meter [28, p. 24].

Notably, China leads the world in the use of non-carbon renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and geothermal, as well as biomass. Although such sources remain a small share of the total primary energy consumption, their use is increasing by 25% annually. In 2018, renewable energy consumption in China was 38% more than in the United States and three times more than in Germany. If China continues to follow this path, then by 2025 the share of renewable sources in the total energy consumption in the country may reach 20% [23]. In the future, China is expected to strengthen its position as a manufacturer of equipment for low-carbon technologies. As recognized by the World Economic Forum, the “shift to zero-emission energy generation and transport means a new set of elements will become key” [29]. As for these new elements for the energy sector, China is the world leader in extracting several key resources needed to produce solar panels, batteries used for vehicles, and other green technologies. Among them are chemical lithium (50% of world production), polysilicon (60%), rare earth metals (70%), graphite (70%), cobalt (80%), and rare earth elements (90%) [29, p. 31].

In the years since the adoption of the concept of sustainable development, China has greatly improved the efficiency of resource use. This is obvious, for example, from the fact that back in 2005 China was ahead of the United States in terms of the efficiency of coal-fired thermal power plants [30, p. 240]. As noted in the Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, water quality also improved markedly as a result of the measures taken. By the end of 2020, the share of surface waters of good or satisfactory quality had increased to 83.4%; water quality in all sections of the main course of the Yangtze River reached Category II for the first time; and 82.3% of the coastal waters of the Bohai Sea were of good or average quality. The proportion of lakes that reached categories I, II, and III in terms of water transparency increased from 90.1% in 2015 to 92.5% in 2019 [28].

The change in the characteristics of the anthropogenic impact on the environment was facilitated by the noticeable servicization of China’s economy observed over the past 20 years. In 2000, the secondary sector of China’s GDP, which includes mainly manufacturing, as well as construction and utilities, accounted for about 45.5% of GDP, while the tertiary sector, or service sector, was 39.8%. By 2019, the picture fundamentally changed: 39.0% of GDP was the share of the secondary sector and 53.9% was the share of the service sector. For large economies, structural changes of this scale over such a short period are practically unprecedented [31]. In addition, this indirectly indicates an increased efficiency of industrial production and its accelerated modernization.

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the implementation of the concept of sustainable development and that of the 2030 Agenda worldwide. In the modern version of the Chinese concept of sustainable development, an important place belongs to confronting the pandemic: the Report on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development claims that China has successfully overcome the problem of the pandemic and improved public health management. By putting people and their lives first, China has made major strategic achievements in the fight against COVID-19 and protected people’s rights to life and health. China has increased investment in the public health infrastructure and created the world’s largest social safety net with basic health insurance covering more than 1.3 bln people [32].
China can be recognized as one of the world leaders in the implementation of the concept of sustainable development; China’s experience is unique and distinctive. Over the past five years, China’s economic performance has been broadly stable, with GDP rising from less than 70 trillion yuan to 100 trillion—a historic achievement. The economic structure has improved, the value added of the tertiary sector (services) has increased from 51.6% to 54.5% of GDP, and more than 60 million new jobs have been created in cities. Steady progress has been made in infrastructure development and new types of transport. China managed to withstand the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 it was the only major economic power in the world to achieve positive economic growth with a GDP growth of 2.3%, which became a contribution to the global economic recovery [28].

Thanks to the state policy of resource conservation and environmental protection, carried out as part of the implementation of the national sustainable development strategy, qualitative changes have been achieved in economic development, aimed at achieving environmental goals. Land resources are protected and used more productively than before. The state of water resources and the atmosphere is controlled, and the level of the main substances polluting life-supporting elements of the environment is steadily decreasing. Regional green development plans are being formed at a faster pace, and the practice of creating ecocities with improved transport has become widespread. Low-carbon areas of energy are developing, electricity is used more efficiently. Over the past 20 years, China has undergone comprehensive changes in the field of environmental conservation, laying a solid foundation for fundamentally improving the country’s environmental situation and realizing sustainable development goals. Along with efforts to improve the situation at home, China contributes to global environmental governance as an active stakeholder firmly committed to international cooperation and the Paris Climate Agreement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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