

Just Transition as Transition *in Justice*: Really Learning From, About and With China

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Abstract: Humanity is undergoing an unprecedented and irreversible transformation, reshaping both the planet and society. The concept of "just transition" has become a central narrative in climate and environmental discourses, yet prevailing scholarship often treats justice as a fixed, universal ideal, attaching it to transition without critically examining its contextual and evolving nature. This Perspective challenges such static interpretations, arguing that just transition should be understood as an ongoing process embedded in historically and culturally specific contexts, and so as a question, not a settled standpoint. We delineate what just transition is not: it is neither a predefined endpoint, nor simply the absence of injustice, nor a mechanism that inherently flattens power hierarchies. Drawing on empirical insights from China, we illustrate how local understandings of justice are shaped by place-specific cultural values and historical power structures. By critiquing dominant assumptions and advocating for a more dynamic, context-sensitive approach, this Perspective contributes to a more inclusive and globally relevant discourse on just transition, offering critical insights for scholars and policymakers navigating the complexities of sustainability transformations.

Keywords: Just transition; Social justice; Power hierarchy; Correlative Justice; China

1. Introduction

Humanity faces an unprecedented, unstoppable transformation of both planet and society. This challenge has spurred research and activism for a "sustainability transition" that is also just. These efforts are commendable, given the clear moral imperative: transitions must benefit all and distribute burdens fairly. We welcome this scholarly literature and have learnt much from studies exploring various dimensions of 'just transition' (e.g. McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Wang & Lo, 2021; Healy & Barry, 2017; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). We aim here, however, to examine critically prevailing notions of just transition and propose alternative perspectives that better address the complexities of systemic change.

We start with a crucial, and generally ignored, corollary of our predicament. If the world is changing as profoundly as we presume, then, *ex hypothesi*, so too are the understandings of normativity relevant to successful, ethical navigation of that fast-changing world. Adrift on an ocean of flux, it is imperative to seek direction by (re)turning to one's compass of values and ethics, individual and collective. Yet this key step does not itself escape that same situation of disintegration. Indeed, only by grasping this do we begin to reckon fully with this 'meta-crisis' (Rowson 2021), its paradox and potential paralysis. The current global challenge is the singularly dizzying one of rebasing in what is of greatest importance *while also simultaneously* having to work out anew *what those values actually are*.

In short, ethics must be seen as evolving, immanent within specific contexts not transcendent and fixed; a stance common amongst more pluralistic conceptions of ethics and ontology. But that implausible transcendent stance underpins most work around 'just transition', being (tacitly) presupposed whenever one claims to be able to judge definitively, against already well-understood benchmarks, whether something as constitutively open-ended as ('this' element of) a still-unfolding system transition is 'just' or not.

Moreover, this approach not only untenably attempts to short-circuit by conceptual fiat a genuinely puzzling predicament, a global moment of profound learning and civilisational 'growing up'. It also manifests in various problems that threaten the whole enterprise.

2. What Just Transition is Not

We present three such distortions, in ascending order of unfamiliarity and (we expect) indigestibility to many concerned with just transition.

2.1 First, just transition is not a fixed endpoint defining an ideal future.

When 'justice' is taken as an unchanging benchmark, this reinforces longstanding habits of conceptualizing 'transition' as an (already known) endpoint – the good (or now, if *unjust*, bad/worse) 'there' vis-à-vis the bad 'here'. Such a conceptualization is itself mistaken and unhelpful regarding practical guidance on transition; a point now widely conceded (Smith et al., 2010; Tyfield et al., 2015). But adding considerations of justice further narrows perspectives, emphasizing immediate impacts, e.g., jobs lost or disturbance from new infrastructure construction 'now/here', in a binary 'before vs. immediately after' fashion.

This framing then, in turn, weakens arguments for transition measures, both ethically and

strategically, as evident in growing global backlash/backsliding vis-à-vis ‘climate action’ targets (e.g., Buller, 2025; Bosetti et al., 2025). Critics can too easily portray initiatives as hypocritical, exacerbating opposition to measures that may be necessary but are evidently disruptive, even penalizing, in the short-term; and, indeed, with the most vulnerable and least responsible often disproportionately bearing those new burdens.

For instance, Europe is currently beset by growing popular/populist political backlash against relatively (if, arguably, still inadequately) ambitious ‘net zero’ targets, on the premise that expedited ‘energy transition’ will increase costs and penalize poorer social strata already struggling with a ‘cost of living’ crisis. In other words, the very language of ‘just transition’ can be – and is now being – actively mobilized by forces sceptical of sustainability transitions *per se*.

In fact, these objections raise entirely legitimate concerns, and attempts to dismiss them, e.g. by disparaging them as selfish short-sightedness, only inflame indignation, to the point that climate targets are in now jeopardy with each European general election (as already evident in the United States). But how is the West in this political bind? By accepting the framing of ‘just transition’ itself in such uncompromising terms, where all harm or loss, for any length of time, to anyone (on an individualized basis) is its manifest negation. On the one hand, then, those passionately committed to ‘just transition’ can opt too easily for the strategic misstep of dismissing the populist backlash as simply unreconstructed selfish attachment to the unjust ‘imperial mode of living’ status quo (Brand & Wissen, 2021); while, on the other, the very same concept of ‘just transition’ can be turned against them, as just described.

The result is fragile, febrile and halting action on transition *per se*, to the satisfaction of no one, while feeding political polarisation that is set to frustrate sustainability action even further if/when it achieves governmental power. Moreover, this framing squanders a crucial opportunity for the profound rethinking that is urgently needed, adopting a systemic perspective that acknowledges the qualitatively novel but inescapable *constitutive interdependence* – of *both* individual person to person *and* humans to higher-order emergent systems – characteristic of our era.

What is needed, therefore, is not systematization of how ‘justice’ is being (re-)conceptualized and radicalized in activist/progressive spaces, then overlaying that on questions of transition (e.g., Arora & Stirling, 2023). Instead, research should conduct precisely the *opposite* move, asking: “what sense and practices of justice emerge from *within* pragmatic transition initiatives, juggling the novel tensions thereby made evident?” We should be led by lessons from going *into* (new) experience, not by appeals to and/or radicalised elaborations of our established normative common-senses. And we need this on an ongoing basis, as the research programme relevant to our new predicament, enacting acknowledgement that (just) transition is a process not an endpoint; and hence, in the ‘meantime’, a(n empirical) question, not an established benchmark. This leads to our second point.

2.2 Secondly, just transition is not ‘anti-unjust transition’.

Reflecting limited investigation regarding the ‘justice’ aspect of ‘just transition’, the phrase has become increasingly defined in restricted, and primarily negative or critical, ways. This widespread presumption sees a ‘just’ transition as one that is *not* ‘unjust’ or is opposed to injustice (O’Riordan, 2019; Eaton et al., 2024). Yet ‘justice’ is much more than the absence of, or anti-, injustice. Rather,

like all states in dynamic socio-technical systems (i.e. contemporary social reality), it is an effortful and transient achievement. Justice is not guaranteed and latent, waiting to be revealed simply by removing obstacles (e.g. some identifiably deplorable settled common-sense) to its expression. It must be *created and sustained*, with the active participation of all those affected by it.

The tendency to interpret ‘just transition’ as equivalent to ‘anti-unjust transition’, thus, is not only mistaken, but also to neglect entirely where effort is primarily needed. Attention is directed only to the negative, viz. vivid and/or extreme cases of *injustice*, which may be ethically important (and affectively arresting), but perhaps unrepresentative of broader system challenges or simply intractable, given existing conceptual understandings. Meanwhile, what gets ignored are other mundane but crucial *positive* (if also imperfect) examples that offer learning opportunities to shift existing understanding (perhaps thereby even remobilizing the ‘background’ of those intractable challenges).

Focusing solely on eliminating injustice thus leads to self-debilitating moral perfectionism, where any credible (if inevitably partial) evidence of negative and/or asymmetric impacts becomes grounds for that transition initiative’s wholesale rejection. Moreover, such a perspective also resonates with, and is reinforced by, parallel shifts in (primarily Western) political discourses regarding ‘justice’ *per se*, which are raising this already impossible bar ever higher. Holding fast, with renewed urgency, to ‘justice’ as currently conceptualized does not, in fact, mean one’s understanding is standing still. Instead, it is today developing in problematic directions, as a newly hyper-sensitive, righteously indignant determination to right (admittedly often grievous) wrongs from the past (often with legacies continuing into the present) – and to do so ‘now’, ‘once and for all’ – in a ratchet of increasingly radicalized ‘anti-injustice’ and ‘year zero’ stances (Furedi, 2024; Mounk, 2023).

Together, this approach to ‘just transition’ and these conceptual-political shifts regarding ‘justice’ lead not to fashioning a discourse and strategy that delivers increasingly effective political mobilization for just transition, as expected by supporters of that approach. To the contrary, and again referring to the example of contemporary populist backlash against sustainability policies, it risks (if it has not already achieved (e.g., Clark, 2023)) permanently poisoning the idea of ‘just transition’ as a dog-whistle in the West’s contemporary polarized ‘culture war’ politics. This spells a hermeneutic hyper-inflation of the term ‘just transition’ that devalues it to little more than a tribal ‘yay/boo’ slogan, hence substantively meaningless and *actively rejected* by a great many (Blühdorn, 2022).

Conversely, a strategic focus on *constructing* justice on an ongoing, rolling basis is primarily prospective, not (just) retrospective, regarding determined rearrangement of the *future* so as to avoid repeating, learn from and rectify (often by resituating) mistakes made in the (unchangeable) past; and while both acknowledging that transitions will inevitably involve trade-offs and seeking to manage them thoughtfully and with more modest ambitions (Lawhon et al., 2022). This approach will also thereby be achieving for ‘just transition’ increasingly compelling substance, not just reassuringly ‘virtuous’ but empty slogans.

2.3 Third, just transition is not the flattening of power hierarchies.

This, in turn, leads to our third point: the superficiality of widespread understanding of the crucial relationship between (in)justice/(un)just transition and power. Power is a key factor underpinning both an insightful strategic analysis of systems transition *per se* and a re-opened exploration of the meaning of justice (Avelino et al., 2024; Tyfield, 2014). The emerging orthodoxy of 'just transition' as 'anti-unjust transition' generally foregrounds its (legitimate) concerns regarding issues of (contemporary imbalances/inequalities in) power (e.g., Stoddard et al., 2021). Moreover, much of this work may even make explicit reference to more sophisticated conceptions of power; for instance, as 'power to' (vs. 'power over', or power-as-domination, alone) and regarding relations and 'technologies' of power/knowledge that are constitutive of systems and selves.

Notwithstanding such explicit lip service, though, a fundamental misunderstanding of that illuminating relational conception of power is still evident in what it is generally taken to entail regarding justice. Too often (evidence of) imbalances of enablement, and so power hierarchies, are treated as *themselves* necessary and sufficient condition for the conclusion of 'injustice', hence 'unjust transition'. In other words, where justice is the elimination of injustice, then justice consists of the equalization and flattening of all hierarchical power relations (= injustice), if not their (temporary?) inversion from the status quo (e.g., for reasons of reparation and/or restoration). 'Just transition' is thus the *opposite* of power hierarchy, as mutually incompatible opposites, and presence of the latter is evidence enough to declaim the absence of the former.

Such an understanding, though, is profoundly mistaken, and, indeed, strategically self-defeating. For power is precisely *not bad* (and so always and everywhere *damnable*), but *dangerous* (Foucault, 1984). And it is dangerous because (a) it is so important and irreducible, being constitutive of (hence both producing and shaping) social relations and subjectivities/identities, and (b) it tends intrinsically, via dynamic positive feedback loops, to its self-concentration, whereupon it tends in turn, absent commensurately powerful disciplines of ethical training, to ethical corruption of the will. It follows, though, first, that power relations will almost *always* be hierarchical, if also always thereby contested and contestable (as per 'counter-conduct' (Foucault, 2007; Hargreaves, 2019)). And, secondly, that the (re)construction of *all and every* social order, through effortful agency and ingenuity, involves – i.e., is *constituted* by – such asymmetrical power relations.

The key question for 'just transition' research is thus not whether power hierarchies exist (viz. regarding hierarchy as unjust transition), but whether the *hierarchical and asymmetric* power relations being dynamically (re-)constructed by 'this' specific transition initiative are contributing to *more* just outcomes over time (viz. regarding unjust, *or just, hierarchy* (Bell & Wang, 2020)).

Indeed, we suggest this line of thinking invites a further step: to accept, and then work from, the conclusion that there is, actually, *no* (prospect of) 'just transition' that does *not* involve significant elements of (no doubt reconstructed, re-dynamized) hierarchical power relations. Achieving systemic transitions requires extraordinary *concentrations* of power to overcome the long-entrenched and enduring system lock-ins – e.g., of both the whole fossil fuel age and its latest global regime of finance-led 'winner-takes-all' neoliberalism –, as well as the competence, expertise, risk appetite and visionary direction needed of leadership to guide such momentous transformations of society (Tyfield & Yuille, 2022). Indeed, any analysis that accepts the need for government and/or state power in any capacity regarding system transition (e.g., in a 'Green New Deal' (Aronoff et al., 2019)) has already conceded the need for hierarchical power relations, with purely egalitarian,

bottom-up initiatives invaluable, but never alone adding/scaling up to the epochal change actually needed for expedited global sustainability transition (as, evidently, they have not to date).

We trust it is evident we are *not* arguing that ‘hierarchy is *per se* good’. To reiterate, though, just as power itself is necessary, constitutive and dangerous, so too regarding the *hierarchies* such power relations necessarily tend to construct, and without which the capabilities of ‘power (to)’ are inevitably limited. This demands not that we repudiate hierarchy but that we take it seriously as the grown-up ethical quandary it is, and become committed to ourselves participating in its ongoing reconstruction, holding it constantly to account as it continues to evolve. In short, the justice of a specific hierarchy of power relations at a specific place and time, and so a specific transition, is always an *empirical* question, and one with a dynamic, and so impermanent, and situated practical answer.

Abstract articulation of these three arguments is certainly necessary for their more widespread currency and acceptance. But we also offer one concrete illustration of these key points and, in particular, the third and most challenging issue regarding ‘just hierarchies’ in and as ‘just transition’. In doing so, we also hope to offer at least initial suggestions regarding the key question arising from the argument above, namely: *granted* just transition is today an empirical question *and* a *still-open-ended-process* – so that we cannot spot examples of ‘transitions that *definitely were/will (have) be(en) just*’ and research them – how can we first identify whether or not a particular initiative is ‘moving in the right direction’ (i.e. the best available proxy criterion) so as to be able to conduct such empirical illumination?

Our example concerns the transition of Chun'an county, drawing on previous research on just transition in China (Huang et al., 2022). Strikingly, this is an example of ostensibly ‘unjust’ transition in several key respects, at least vis-à-vis prevailing normative benchmarks. Yet closer and more emic attention to the case reveals a strong (or at least, richly suggestive and theoretically fruitful) argument, not just regarding the surprising *justice* – viz. momentum and trajectory towards *more* just medium-term futures – of these developments, but also, thereby, regarding the broader conceptual challenge and redefinition we set out here.

3 Transition in Correlative Justice: An Empirical Lens from China

3.1 Background and Rationale

China occupies a central position globally regarding decarbonization transition, framed by its agenda of ‘ecological civilization’, which promotes sustainable modes of production and consumption and human-nature co-evolution (Huang and Westman, 2021). In recent years, transition initiatives have proliferated in regions across China. This section draws on one such case study to explore how just transition is interpreted, practiced, and experienced at local level in the Chinese context.

Chun'an county, well known for hosting Qiandao Lake, is under the jurisdiction of Hangzhou city, Zhejiang province. The industrialization of Chun'an began in the 1980s, leading to establishment of a diversified but polluting industrial system encompassing sectors such as food processing, beverages, silk textiles, chemicals, wood processing, electronics, machinery, and mineral resources.

This process of rapid, unregulated development led to widespread ecological damage, particularly contaminating Qiandao Lake.

Although accelerated by the ecological civilization strategy, Chun'an's green transition began as early as the 1990s when higher-level authorities reaffirmed Qiandao Lake's ecological value. Over the following decades, Chun'an underwent a radical shift from an industrial-based economy to a service- and ecology-oriented model, marked by the closure of polluting enterprises. Tourism, prioritized as a key sector, accounted for 96.5% of county GDP by 2020 (Jiang, 2023). This transformation was institutionalized through its designation as a "Special Ecological Function Zone", leading to comprehensive reforms in land use, energy consumption, and transportation (Chun'an County Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources, 2023).

Together, these efforts reconfigured Chun'an's economic structure and governance model, positioning it as a model of place-based ecological transition. Nevertheless, radical de-industrialization has come with consequences. For two decades, the county's economy has grown slowly, frequently ranking among the lowest in Zhejiang. The impacts are not solely economic; factory closures resulted in substantial job losses and population outmigration, giving rise to broader social challenges.

Chun'an's case illustrates the classic dilemma between environmental conservation and economic development. This dilemma poses a significant challenge for many developing countries, not just China, touching core issues of social justice vis-à-vis just transition. Despite various policy innovations, challenges lie ahead regarding the delivery of a 'just transition'. Chun'an stands out as an informative case study not because it is an exemplar for transition in China (or elsewhere), but precisely because it embodies the *profound complexity and richness of issues* associated with just transition when this agenda is embraced in the empirical spirit we advocate here.

3.2 Method and Data

In January and February 2022, the research team conducted two rounds of fieldwork in Chun'an County, collecting both second-hand documentary materials and first-hand interview data. The first round of fieldwork centred on interviews with government officials and industry experts: a total of six one-on-one interviews and two focus group discussions with 11 participants, with an average duration of approximately 90 minutes. The second round of fieldwork focused on engaging local residents, with 141 street interviews of an average duration of seven minutes. Interviews with local government officials focused on the strategic planning and administrative challenges involved in implementing Chun'an's green transition. Conversations with industry experts examined the role of local enterprises in shaping Chun'an's evolving industrial positioning within the broader ecological development agenda. Interviews with local residents explored their lived experiences, including perceptions of environmental change, impacts on livelihoods, and attitudes toward the transition's social and economic implications.

3.3 What Just Transition *is* in China: Empirical Insights from Chun'an County

Aligned with the three arguments above, we empirically identify three key, and non-obvious, considerations that help empirically identify this case as one that seems to be 'moving in the right

direction', albeit imperfectly and without guarantees (in fact, guarantees that simply do not exist) regarding ultimately 'just' outcomes (summarized in Table 1). These issues can also, then, be used in other work elsewhere.

Table 1: How to (begin to) identify and explore cases of 'just transition'

What 'just transition' is not	How can one tell empirically if a given case is an example of just transition in action, viz. 'moving in the right direction'?			
	Look for evidence of:	Look for evidence that the initiative is against:		
		'Individualist'	'Collectivist'	
A predefined end-point, in the utopian future	Prospective medium/long-term temporal gaze (leading to collective learning)	Presentism	<i>Complacent & short-termist</i>	<i>Self-righteous, retrospective & focused on immediate correcting of the past</i>
Anti-unjust transition	Balance of multiple collectively shared values, including but not limited to justice	Value fundamentalism	<i>Another value, not or against 'justice'</i>	<i>'Justice' alone</i>
Flattening of (all) power hierarchies	Collective responsibility in action, as 'justice-ing' hierarchy	Confusion regarding hierarchy	<i>Sanguine regarding status quo unjust hierarchy</i>	<i>Total rejection of all hierarchy per se</i>

First, in China, a just transition is operationalized through hierarchical power relations that express collective responsibility in action. China's hierarchical administrative structure (from central to township) enables the central government to exert macro-level control while also permitting selective decentralization and adaptive governance responsive to local conditions (Heberer & Schubert, 2012).

As mentioned, Chun'an's green transition has been accompanied by economic decline, job losses, and population shrinkage. A local official reported:

"Without industry, there are issues with employment and population decline. During the sixth national census, there were 450,000 registered residents, and in the seventh, 320,000 permanent residents."

To address these issues, multilevel governments have continuously introduced policy innovations — ranging from ecological trading schemes to digital branding — to enhance Chun'an County's capacity for economic compensation and development. All of these policy innovations operate through a highly hierarchical institutional system. For example, the green finance initiative "Two Mountains Bank" — driven by the political ambitions of higher-level authorities (e.g., Xi Jinping's "Two Mountains Theory"¹) — operates across multiple administrative layers. It coordinates top-

¹ Xi Jinping's "Two Mountains Theory" denotes that "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets". The core philosophy of the "Two Mountains Bank" is vividly described, with familiar Chinese policy flourish, as "depositing lucid waters and lush mountains to withdraw gold and silver mountains."

down policy directives with bottom-up feedback, integrating local experiences into subsequent policymaking at higher levels (Yu et al., 2023).

This financial instrument is currently being trialled throughout Zhejiang province to enable financialization of rural idle lands and natural resources, as a key part of the region's 'ecological civilization' construction. By 2022, a total of 56 sites had received business investment in Chun'an under this scheme, transferring ecological resources and assets into marketable products and services. The "Two Mountains Bank" initiative, among other policy innovations, is thereby creatively and experimentally offering new sociotechnical intermediations between economic development and ecological quality that aim to benefit *both* Chun'an residents and the broader Chinese 'system'. As such, it shows how collective responsibility in action – seeking to straddle the twin, but potentially diverging, concerns of individual wellbeing and collective integrity and dynamism – is intimately connected with dynamic reproduction and reconstruction of a *power hierarchy* in which higher tiers are constantly re-earning their legitimacy as the 'sine qua non' of initiatives oriented to and delivering positive change for the people.

The process of 'justice-ing' hierarchy in this way thus manifests and reinforces (shared senses of) collective responsibility, while that shared conviction in collective responsibility continually reaffirms and crystallizes in that dynamically stabilized power hierarchy. In short, while far from perfect and littered with antagonisms and dysfunctions, this case illustrates the key *empirical* lesson that just(-ice-ing) hierarchy and collective responsibility in action are two sides of the same coin.

Moreover, specific conceptual/theoretical openings are offered by attentive qualitative concern with this case. For instance, hierarchy constitutes one facet of what may be called the *correlative* (not merely 'relational') nature of Chinese society (Huang et al., 2021). According to sociologist Fei Xiaotong (1985), the social structure of Chinese society is best depicted as "*chaxu geju*" (差序格局, 'a differential mode of association'). This conceptual model involves two dimensions, a horizontal dimension "*cha*" ('difference') and a vertical dimension "*xu*" ('order, sequence, starting'). The former refers to a multi-layered egocentric network, with inner circles signifying stronger social ties and outer circles weaker (Peng, 2004). The latter embodies the hierarchical social order rooted in Confucian ethics of a well-ordered and morally guided society, emphasizing structured relationships, reverence for authority, filial piety, and personal cultivation of moral virtues (Herrmann-Pillath, 2016).

This hierarchical character of Chinese society (and widespread popular acceptance thereof) has shaped its state-society relations, mediated then *also* through the differentiated inter-personal connections ('*cha*' above, or *guanxi*) of specific individuals in different, and more or less powerful, roles. This further illuminates Chun'an's transition. For instance, political will from top leaders has played a significant role. During his tenure as the Secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee in the early 2000s, Xi Jinping personally made multiple visits to Chun'an. His directives on establishing Chun'an as an ecological county set the tone (i.e. precisely as 'sine qua non') for its green transformation over the next twenty years (Cheng et al., 2023). And, crucially, it is through those dual mechanisms of clear governmental hierarchy and interpersonal connections that the (*in*)justice of the hierarchies thereby being (re-)constructed have been (and continue to be) both

enacted and contested. This results in the broadly positive, if still far-from-perfect, current status, and with both elements (*cha* and *xu*) contributing to both enactment and contestation (Table 2).

Table 2: Complex inter-relations of current injustice and emerging justice in Chun'an county

Element of <i>chaxu geju</i>	Current injustice	Dynamically forming justice
<i>'Cha' – differential egocentric interpersonal relations</i>	Exclusive guanxi relations with powerful individuals	Interpersonal networks of feedback and concern
<i>'Xu' – top-down state-society relations of governmental hierarchy</i>	Top-down decisions overriding local objections and (immediate/short-term) interests	Top-down capacity/competence for new policy initiatives

Moreover, we suggest *chaxu geju* and correlative analysis could illuminate the issues of just hierarchy (Bell and Wang, 2020) in transitions across a much broader – even global – geography beyond China. This perspective accepts, from the outset, that social relations are power relations, and so human social life is inherently both political and imperfect(ible); rather than treating power as a normatively outrageous and descriptively outlying case that needs to be 'neutralized' and/or critiqued. A correlative analysis thus invites precisely the *empirical* work needed to observe whether a given hierarchical arrangement is becoming more just or unjust due to the 'transition' initiative in question; most obviously in terms of asking of it "how is collective responsibility – seeking neither to smash hierarchy nor simply to preserve and entrench it as it is, but rather to *transform and restabilize* it – in evidence?" Open-mindedness regarding *just* hierarchies within, and as crucial elements of, just transition, in short, opens novel and exciting theoretical avenues for the necessary ongoing learning about and reconceptualization of the latter.

It may be countered that there is considerable risk in the flexibility of view advocated here of openness to hierarchical, and even quite uncompromising top-down, power arrangements as potentially being 'just' or delivering 'justice'. For how does one then avoid not becoming simply a patsy and mouthpiece for the justification of authoritarian power? Yet we gladly concede this risk, but with one crucial qualification: that this is an *objection* to (rather than clarification of) our argument only insofar as it is objecting *not* to the risk of such co-optation, or dilution of 'justice' demands and conceptions, but to the nature of *power per se*. It is thus an unreasonable and strategically self-defeating objection.

Accepting that power *simply is* dangerous and self-concentrating means that its riskiness can never be fully domesticated, no matter how sophisticated our thought or concept of 'justice'. And so the only way to avoid such co-optation by power, and its settled form as an incumbent hierarchy, is by *actually doing so in practice*, enacting countervailing senses of justice. In other words, there simply *does not exist* any conception of hierarchy (including *no hierarchy*) that can *guarantee* we are not charmed and/or pressured into neglecting injustices that serve the power/knowledge structures within which we live, so this cannot be the risk at play in any reasonable objection to the idea of 'just hierarchy'.

Conversely, only a *prima facie* acceptance of the *possibility* of just hierarchy serves to preserve and motivate our alertness to these irreducible dangers – viz. “hierarchies exist, are dangerous, and so may well be unjust, but *can also be just if we, collectively, attend to making them so*” –; while the false reassurance of defining hierarchy as ‘unjust’ *per se* serves to blind us to these risks, since we can then too easily believe we have captured and defined the essence of ‘injustice’ (viz. the concentration of power in hierarchical relations) when we have done no such thing.

Orientation towards ‘just hierarchy’ thus does not expose us to dangers from which we would otherwise be secured, but rather it is the opposite conviction, that hierarchy is necessarily unjust, that averts our gaze from dangers that remain there regardless. And our case of Chun'an illustrates precisely these insights, where shared orientation to the possibility of, and thence active need for, just hierarchy underpins meaningful, if (to repeat) imperfect, progress (viz. ‘in the right direction’) towards such an outcome, and hence towards just transition itself.

Secondly, in China transition is viewed as a medium/long-term endeavour that has already spanned decades and will continue for generations. The transition of Chun'an resembles the development trajectory of numerous counties in post-reform China: from rapid, unregulated industrialization and resource exploitation, to severe environmental degradation, to a phase of environmental treatment and the de-industrialization of polluting industries, and finally to pursuit of new modes of green industrialization and sustainable development.

China’s current wave of green transition is generally viewed as, and understood to be, part of a broader, longer-term socio-economic transformation of Chinese society. This perspective is deeply ingrained in the contemporary collective mindset of Chinese people, shaped by both a shared (and officially cultivated; even exaggerated) sense of (pride in) the long history of the ancient Chinese civilization, and the contemporary experiences of multiple structural socio-economic transformations since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (Huang et al., 2021).

In Chun'an, the transition is commonly perceived to be a sustained effort spanning decades. As expressed by a local official:

“While [green] transitions may be a new idea in the current climate change context, I would say Chun'an has been practicing this [transition] since the early 1990s.....To protect Qiandao Lake, de-industrialization occurred much earlier than elsewhere in Zhejiang..... To Chun'an, transition refers to fostering green development, this is what we have been doing for a long time.”

This widespread perspective and patience, however, is not only a singular socio-cultural asset regarding actual prosecution of the exceptionally challenging and uncertain process of building a just transition over the medium/long-term. From a research perspective, too, it further illuminates the greater insight and analytical purchase of such a perspective of justice vis-à-vis just transition. Specifically, it leaves *open* – if without in any way diminishing its ethical weight and urgency – and, thereby remotivates, the *question* whether ‘this transition’ will *turn out to (have) be(en)* ‘just’ or not. Thus, while one needs to be able to identify a case as, *prima facie*, an example of just transition, from which empirical lessons are available, it is *also* the case that that judgement *remains permanently provisional*; and so we need (research) perspectives that support this stance.

In short, a *correlative* perspective, this time regarding *temporalities* of transition, again emerges here, in which the past, the present and, crucially, the (medium/long-term) future of (a) transition are not viewed as separated but as interconnected and co-evolving. Viewing just transition through this temporal lens, encompassing both historical experiences and future visions, rejects the perception of transition as a cross-sectional snapshot and instead *actually enacts* the commonplace scholarly understanding of transition – and *just* transition – as ongoing process and rolling collective responsibility. As evidenced in Chun'an, then, the empirical test for a purported instance of just transition would seem to be: ‘is there evidence of clear medium/long-term perspective, oriented to (collective) learning-by-doing; and hence *repudiating* a presentism, whether self-righteous, regarding the need for immediate rectification of historical wrongs, or complacent, regarding a blinkered short-termism?’

Similar objections may arise here as discussed above, regarding how a promise of justice ‘in the long-term’ serves as perfect get-out clause for an indefinitely unjust political arrangement. Such long-term promises, and often in the most eschatological, utopian terms, have historically sustained the most oppressive, even murderous, of authoritarian regimes; a crucially important consideration. And yet such ideologically fervent situations are, in fact, in striking *contrast* to the situation in contemporary China, and hence to the case presented here. Indeed, contemporary China is amongst the countries today that are *most* scarred by, and hence wary of, such absolutist, ideological commitment, as a matter of the bitterest recent (and certainly still-living) memory (Mitter, 2005).

Chun'an thus exemplifies quite a different relationship to the promise of ‘justice in the future’, illustrating the case we are making. To the very opposite of blinkered, fundamentalist belief in future justice as ‘guaranteed’, here instead we find – and affirm – ongoing open-eyed, empirical investigation of what is currently being constructed, balanced with a pragmatic longer-term view of where this may be leading. What is crucial, though, is that this orientation is necessarily founded upon a shared commitment to the *possibility* of constructing more just futures but *only on the practical basis* that there is indeed a shared, longer-term view; that, with time and deliberate effort, ostensible conflicts of interest in the here-and-now can be worked through and aligned. The essential wisdom of this temporal stance, thus, lies in shared recognition that actually *building* more just futures is founded on a collective stance that is *actively and practically affirmative* of such an outcome ‘in due course’.

Finally, and relatedly, regarding (*doing*) just transition vs. (*flagging*) anti-unjust transition, some degree of injustice is viewed as inevitable in, even inherent to, this long-term and sustained transition process. This implies a further *correlative* relation, between injustice and justice themselves, as a co-arising *duality* to be skilfully governed and balanced (over time, as a process), not a *dualism* of incommensurable opposites. Here, injustice is not viewed as separate or opposed to justice, but as an inescapable element or moment of realizing a just transition. As crucial corollary, it also demands recognition of *multiple*, potentially (productively) clashing, values (*Cf* Berlin, 1958; Crowder 2020), not just justice alone: e.g. peace and stability, cultural belonging and collective flourishing, ‘abundance’ (Klein & Thompson 2025), and/or liberty. Chun'an illustrates both points: a public sense of the duality of justice/injustice, and the counterbalancing of justice with other shared values.

Although Chun'an's ecological protection has caused economic setbacks, reduced employment opportunities, and population outflow, locals tend to view the current wave of green transition within the broader context of a progressive longer-term process. As a local official in Chun'an expressed:

"Environmental pressures have caused Chun'an's economy to regress by ten years; however, the transition will inevitably bring a period of painful adjustment."

A resident likewise noted:

"For Chun'an, the sacrifice for environmental protection is significant. But if we look at the bigger picture, we've got to keep going down this road, right? As the saying goes nowadays, 'lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets'. This is something we must respond to. Everyone is willing to do their part, but we also hope the government pays more attention to us."

Under this correlative perspective, a just transition is not about complete avoidance of injustice but rather about actively addressing injustices as they arise, and identifying how *that* may best be done (in specific times/places). This conception also then enables the arising of (or, perhaps, reinforcement of the pre-existing contending value of) that most precious of cultural-political assets for transition – a sense of collective purpose and common fate, including willingness (although rightly not unlimited) to endure some burdens personally for shared, future gain. And this, in turn, enables what may otherwise be defined as 'injustices' to be downgraded in public understanding merely to, perhaps albeit 'inescapable', 'harms' or 'losses'.

The transition of Chun'an county is then an informative example of how harms, as proto-injustices, incurred at specific moments of a transition (e.g., loss of economic development opportunities) have been actively addressed with sustained endeavours (e.g., various ecological compensation mechanisms). For ordinary people, the transition to a green economy is approached with understanding that short-term sacrifices are necessary for long-term environmental sustainability and economic resilience, which are, in turn, valued as matters of collective integrity and flourishing as much as issues of (social and/or environmental) justice. As expressed by a local resident:

"Most people think that protecting the environment is necessary. Even though individuals might face some losses, every reform and progress involves some risks. It's not always a win-win situation; there will always be some losses and some gains."

Another resident expressed similar opinions:

"People generally agree with the environmental protection policies because, in the long run, they benefit everyone, including ourselves. However, these measures will inevitably sacrifice some people's interests."

'Injustices' incurred in the course of transition, insofar as they are widely (if contestably) understood to be 'short term', are thus not deployed for opposition to the transition itself, but as opportunities for furthering and deepening it; directing political attention, both bottom-up and top-down, to issues that need addressing as the 'next step' in the irreducibly practical and improvisatory, responsive ongoing process of transition.

In Chun'an, in other words, many local officials and residents share the conviction that actually *building* just transition is an inescapably messy process, involving 'breaking some eggs' to make the 'omelette'; and not only regarding dealing with the injustices arising from the process of transition itself, but also, crucially, thereby constructing a new socio-technical system locally that transforms the *pre-existing* injustices afflicting the area, e.g. poverty, under-development and pollution.

It may be tempting, given a more absolutist stance regarding just transition, to interpret such general acceptance² of interim harm as evidence of defeatist subservience to authoritarian coercion and/or failure to combat injustice. But this would be a problematically patronizing analysis. Contemporary China is not a place where people are blindly committed to 'eating bitterness' for the sake of the 'Great Revolution'. Rather they are actively engaged in pragmatic self-advancement, albeit in the all-important context of a shared sense of collective rejuvenation of their locale and country as a whole. The acceptance of transient 'injustice' is thus never unqualified nor reflex, but is a deliberate and strategic commitment to 'delayed gratification' for a better future outcome, and in ways that are constantly open to recalibration vis-à-vis *other* prioritized values. This creates a dynamic context for ongoing public education in the changing normativity (including ongoing *redefinition* of 'justice') relevant to a changing world.

The pragmatic, duality-view acceptance of injustice as *part of* processes constructing just futures is thus in no way submissive acceptance of a double-speak excusing unjust top-down power. To the contrary, it has significantly enabled potentially – if still-to-be-proven – *profoundly positive* change that would not otherwise have been possible; or, at the very least, change *per se* in the general 'right direction' and with momentum dependent on this shared conception of 'just transition', which is evidently preferable to stasis in the pre-existing situation of widespread hardship. In short, totalized and uncompromising rejection of all (harm as) 'injustice' does not deliver justice, but only a different type of injustice-by-default, of the ongoing, worsening paralysis of failed or stalled transition *per se*. And following the lessons from Chun'an, one can enquire empirically whether any given case is moving in that 'right direction' by asking: 'what evidence is there of *multiple contending values, including justice*, that are broadly shared amongst those involved in ways productive of collective *normative learning*?'

4 Conclusion

Our key criticism is that the crucial agenda of 'just transition' remains unserious, if not actively problematic, insofar as it presumes that 'justice' itself is not *also* in transition, and so in question. Amidst profound disorientation, relying (and/or doubling down) on familiar ethical frameworks may feel reassuring but is ultimately self-defeating, as these frameworks often contribute to the very perplexity they aim to resolve since they likely manifest the moral vacuum left by exhaustion of *that very preexisting ethical perspective*. Instead, we need a new agenda for (research on) 'just transition' that accepts, and wrestles directly with, this challenging predicament *and its opportunities* to begin to construct a *new*, more capacious and globally-inclusive ethics responsive to the unprecedented 'imperative of responsibility' (Jonas, 1984) in a new socio-techno-ecological world.

We have illustrated this argument with a case study from China, a critical yet underexplored site for

² Textual analysis of street interviews showed that, excluding those without a clear opinion, 55% of the 141 local residents interviewed expressed a positive perception of Chun'an's green transition, while only 16% expressed a negative view.

(just) sustainability transitions. China's development over the past two decades often defies Western sustainability benchmarks, exposing the limits of conventional frameworks. However, this exploration does not aim to depict China as a model of justice but as a dynamic case that challenges (often paralyzingly) dualistic narratives (e.g., Global North vs. South, Western vs. Indigenous, pro-technology vs. pro-nature) and offers new pragmatic insights or provocations, including for work elsewhere. Being also amongst the world's most dynamic testing grounds for green and digital transitions, China *compels* re-evaluation of entrenched assumptions about justice and transition.

As we have repeatedly stressed, though, the learning urgently needed today regarding just transition is not solely about how to realize that noble goal in practice but also what it actually *means*. Crucial in this regard, then, is willingness to be confronted by conclusions regarding the very (changing/evolving) nature of 'justice' *per se* that do not immediately, seamlessly fit with existing preconceptions, and then to enquire, patiently and sincerely (or 'modestly' per Lawhon et al., 2022), into what may be learnt from adopting that perspective and thinking in that way. On this score too, though, engagement with China, and the correlative perspective to which a situated analysis thereof gives rise, exemplifies precisely the kinds of insights thereby available.

Specifically, against the solidifying orthodoxy that it is the (anti-in)justice of '*just* transition' that assures the ethical-political goodness of 'transition', in China we encounter a very different, and arresting, stance. 'Actually making a transition happen' runs like a thread through the endeavours of a wide array of actors who keep driving the transition forward, generating contemporary China's extraordinary and undeniable dynamism. Likewise, in China a just transition is not perceived as the complete avoidance of injustices or the resistance to specific initiatives upon the arising of injustices, but as the actual *delivery*, over the medium-term, of a transition in the most just manner possible. In short, the fundamental belief shared by both the government and the society is that **making a demonstrable transition actually happen is itself the greatest justice**; a conclusion that, even if we do not endorse it entirely, stands in stark contrast to, and as insistent and productive criticism of, the settling consensus regarding 'just transition' scholarship.

Certainly, this approach holds up an unflattering mirror to settled Western common-senses, showing how behind the uncompromising and strategically unhelpful normative absoluteness of much contemporary 'just transition' discourse lies the continuing presumption, for all its declaration of attunement to planetary crisis, that, in fact, profound change is *not* now inevitable and so simply defending/expanding what 'we' now already have is a viable way forward; i.e. that no eggs need be broken, and indeed that we *must* break no eggs for 'transition' to be 'just'. For how else can a strategy primarily focused on *blocking* (as per 'anti-injustice') rather than building be understood in any way to be a programme of delivering 'just transition'? In short, while the Chinese case shows that commitment to 'transition' first and 'justice' second (but as *still crucial*) can actually move towards 'just transition', too often 'just transition' in the West (-dominated discourse) is being pursued by placing 'just' as primary and absolute, with veto powers, and 'transition' as a distant second... with the result that neither transition nor justice is being delivered.

Moreover, this contrast in offerings is starker still given a world in which *global* transition is urgently necessary, and especially – ethically – in 'developing' countries that are both the demographic majority and the sites of most (need for) foreseeable economic growth (which *needs* 'transition' to

avoid following existing high-carbon pathways). While the ostensible moral high ground but practical paralysis of Western ‘just transition’ offers little here, lessons from the Chinese approach, with its demonstrable momentum and practical outcomes, surely promise pragmatic insight of greater and wider relevance, *including* regarding its flaws and/or local specificities.

Indeed, if *Western* scholars/policymakers could also learn from the Chinese approach, perhaps this could even help foster mutual recognition and understanding between China and the West, enabling collaborative (if still competitive) ‘progress’ on transition in a ‘race to the top’ rather than ‘to the bottom’ (e.g., Hensley & Lappetelainen, 2023); itself crucial, given worsening geopolitical tensions that risk fallout of potentially disastrous impacts on the expedited global – and, just – transition that is needed.

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