

## 17<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Podcast Series (Tackling the Grand Challenge in Individual and Social well-being)

**Episode 4:** China's vision for global environmental governance: notes from the ground

**Speaker:** Dr Marina Kaneti, Assistant Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

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**Ben Cashore:** Welcome to the fourth episode of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's 17th Anniversary Podcast Series. To celebrate our anniversary, we're speaking with some of the school's experts on the overall theme of, "Tackling the grand challenges in individual and social wellbeing."

I'm Ben Cashore, the Li Ka Shing Professor in Public Management and also the director of the initiative to create the Lee Kuan Yew School's Public Policy Institute on Environment and Sustainability.

And joining me today is Dr Marina Kaneti, Assistant Professor in our school who will be examining China's vision for global environmental governance. As we all know, there's arguably no greater challenge facing the planet than the global climate crisis. The scientific evidence is quite clear that humanity's impact on the climate and that ecosystems has been negative and accelerating at a faster pace than we originally envisioned.

And the time is now of the essence to act before it is too late. Indeed, almost all the world governments including China now agree that we have a collective responsibility to address these problems.

And in that regard, then we have the work of Dr Kaneti who sheds light on what China's vision is for the global environment and how we can draw on that to make a difference in this world and address these critical challenges and should be doing this from a very important perspective looking at and thinking about her work on the ground, in the field and thinking about how the different ways

in which ideas and concerns emerge within China and across China's partners is so important.

So, with that, I'm going to begin the conversation by turning to Dr Kaneti and welcoming her and asking, can you talk a little bit about your own research approach to generate insights and what makes you unique in the way you collect data for these important questions facing our planet?

**Marina Kaneti:** Great. Thank you, Ben. And it's a pleasure to be part of this conversation and I'm very grateful to the school for inviting me to be part of the 17th Anniversary Podcast Series. Speaking about my approach to problems in the world and understanding major challenges, my approach probably differs from many of the traditional ways in which people try to understand social problems. My approach is different in that I'm cognisant of the ways in which visuality and the senses usually impact the way in which we think about the social world around us. In other words, we live in a visual world. We are surrounded by digital media, social media, and this impacts our understanding of the world in ways in which we don't often think and talk about in academia.

And this is what I try to bring in my research above and beyond what I do with China, the Belt and Road Initiative or the environment, which of course also for the purposes of academic research, I integrate various methods. So, in addition to visuality, I would also say that my approach differs from others in the fact that it's very interdisciplinary.

Unlike a lot of other scholars, I try to draw on history, on philosophy, on politics, on the environment when I study various questions. And this is because I want to present a holistic picture of the world around us and bring attention to various aspects of critical questions that although examined in a lot of detail from, let's say an economist perspective or political science perspective, or some other positivist social inquiry perspective, are missing the context, let's say of history or interactions amongst people over the way in which what they see and what they hear in their everyday interactions also impacts them.

**Ben Cashore:** So, you raised this idea of positivism in your response when you're discussing your review. Right?

**Marina Kaneti:** When I refer to positivism, I pretty much try to put into a big basket everything that is associated with surveys or generating regressions or looking at causality and "big N" (Large N) type of work. And I don't want to say that there's anything wrong with that.

But at the same time, I do want to claim that there is a lot to miss when you're just generating a lot of responses or a lot of explorations that just look at numbers and have difficulties accounting for how people understand the world, how they react to things in their lives whether it's something that they see, whether it's something they hear, they smell.

And I think that's really important, especially when we talk about the environment. And I'll give you an example, in China where we think there is an authoritarian government that you can never criticise because of course you don't criticise the party. In the early 2000s, there were a lot of criticisms from citizens who could not stand the foul smell in their city, coming from the burning of waste materials.

Right? So, there were villages that would take on e-waste and burn it so that they can extract certain parts of it. So, people started complaining. They could not stand the smell. It was too much for them. Gradually that got into the party circuits. It became a big deal. And 10, 20 years later, you have a ban on waste going into China.

But this whole thing started with people's reaction to a foul smell. And I think what we are missing when we look at the world just from a big data or from a so-called positivist way, is we're missing these very important components of how people interact with our world. And this is what I want to bring to the forefront to kind of complement other types of studies that are being done.

And that's why my approach to investigating how people interact and what kind of impact certain policies or certain global ambitions might have is on, on the senses, on the way people understand the world.

**Ben Cashore:** Thank you for that elaboration of the way in which you add knowledge to the questions of how ideas about the environment and concerns come onto the agenda in a Chinese context and implications for the globe.

It was very compelling and very interesting.

Can you tell us a little bit more about how your research contributes towards understanding China's role in environmental governance generally, and also in particular to the climate challenges facing our world?

**Marina Kaneti:** Thank you Ben for this question. And let me start with two preliminary points. First as a lifelong student of politics, my interest in China's evolving environmental policies is directly linked to questions about Beijing's

global ambitions and vision for world order. Although I'm not the first nor the only one to point to the link between the Chinese government's environmental objectives and global ambitions. I think we're still at the beginning of a rapidly evolving and potentially very significant historical trend. In other words, we have yet to see how China's approach to the environment might contribute in forwarding Beijing's ambitions for an alternative world order. And even more importantly, the extent to which such ambition will impact the environment and have any tangible bearing on the ground.

I will return to this point in a minute, but let me just also say that the genealogy, if we may call it this, of China's evolving discourse and policies on the environment is in itself a fascinating subject.

And what is now nearly a century old discourse in Chinese leadership has not only moved from slogans, such as "mankind must conquer nature," to, "harmony between nature and mankind," but now also sees ecological civilisation as the cornerstone of the next stage of human civilisation, a stage which can course correct the rift between humans and nature caused by the industrial revolution. Not a small way to talk about grand ambitions.

Second and related in my work, I explore the concrete implications of China's environmental leadership on the ground, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Last week, for example, at a high-level symposium, Xi Jinping charted a new trajectory for the Belt and Road, prioritising cooperation on and I'll quote here, "green and low-carbon energy, information sharing and capacity building for green and low-carbon development and deepening of cooperation on ecological environment and climate governance." This announcement is important because it is indicative of the ways in which the so-called Green Belt and Road is poised to become a leading mechanism in Beijing's overarching vision for alternative environmental governance, sustainable development, and ultimately world order, but still, hyperboles such as "shared future for mankind and nature," tell us very little about opportunities and challenges on the ground, or whether indeed China's proposed interventions on developing alternative energy sources or biodiversity protection can have the desired effect.

And this is also where I position my contribution to the emerging discourse. I argue that existing approaches to assessing China's environmental initiatives, overlook key elements of the challenge posed by climate change and the catastrophic impact of human activity on biodiversity and ecological systems, to be sure there's nothing wrong with positivism or with studies and analysis interrogating China's co-dependency, the possibilities of replicating China's

domestic environmental protection measures abroad or examining the new comprehensive guidelines for green investment along the Belt and Road. These are all things that scholars are currently doing.

However, I argue that none of these are sufficient or meaningful on the ground.

And especially in the context of Belt and Road projects, this is because such assessments tend to focus on the Chinese government actions and occasionally on the corresponding responses from partner governments. But these tend to overlook key challenges related to both climate change and environmental justice.

So, what are these challenges? In a nutshell, they can be expressed as a prevailing tendency to discount the urgency and need for timely actions, the lack of central authority to oversee and ensure compliance and enact policies. And the fact that those who are causing the problem are also in charge of fixing it. Of course, some might immediately recognise the reference to Ben's own work on super wicked problems.

**Ben Cashore:** I did.

**Marina Kaneti:** Indeed, in assessing China's vision for global environmental governance and especially the ways in which such vision corresponds to tangible on the ground realities, I incorporate elements of the framework on super wicked problems.

**Ben Cashore:** Fascinating. You mentioned that, this term ecological modernisation, but you and I both know it comes out of this literature that talks about how society and governments recognise that as they become modernised, they have responsibility to incorporate the environment some way into their programmes and which is a very fascinating kind of observation that many scholars make.

And it carries both as you pointed out these visual aspects and as well as these tool-based approaches. So, I'm wondering in your own research and analysis, what accounts for this shift that you're noticing in the Chinese context, why would they be now moving in this direction?

**Marina Kaneti:** Well, the literature on why China is moving in this direction or at least scholars who are looking at this is that China is basically using the environment as another tool to develop its vision for world order.

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** In many ways. I agree with this prescription, but I think there is more to this. In my opinion, Xi Jinping, he is using the environment to develop this ideological base. This is also why there are now about 20 institutes in China that work on ecological civilisation. And this is also why ecological civilisation, this idea of the connection between humankind and nature has become central to the discourse that comes from Beijing.

**Ben Cashore:** That's fascinating

**Marina Kaneti:** And here it's important to add another element which goes beyond what scholars are saying that China uses the environment to promote its vision for world order.

Although this is true, the added element here is first, Xi Jinping's revolutionary vision, right? So, it's a revolutionary vision because he believes, or he wants us to believe, that by a new paradigm where men and or people and nature are together as one, he will jump ahead of, or beyond what was done during the industrial revolution.

And so, he's taking the last 200 years of development and saying time to leap forward, time to move ahead. So that's revolutionary at the same time he's using ancient Chinese philosophy. So, this notion of humankind and, nature together, "tian ren he yi" (天人合一) in Chinese, is both within the Confucian and the Taoist cannons.

And so, he's integrating ancient Chinese philosophy, with this vision for a modern world.

**Ben Cashore:** Wow

**Marina Kaneti:** So quite revolutionary.

**Ben Cashore:** Let me ask you then in that context, which I think nicely goes back to the previous parts of our conversation about the different methods you bring to generate these insights. What does this mean then for the global environmental governance challenges that the world's facing, but also China's increasingly involved in deliberating over?

**Marina Kaneti:** Yes. So, this is where actually your framework with the super wicked problems helps a lot. On the first level, it helps with thinking whether or

not in what China is proposing, this new type of relationship between people and nature. How does time factor in?

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** So, one of the things that you're saying is that there is inherent urgency in what we need to be doing.

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** And that is definitely not part of the conversations so far in what China is presenting to the world. There is no sense of urgency. A lot of the things that China's proposing are done with kind of a long game plan in place. And I can also speak a little bit if you don't mind on how also this translates to problems on the ground because it's not just ideology. As I said, what I'm interested in is to try to understand how this very high-level ideology may or may not match the realities on the ground.

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** For example, by looking at the question of time I can argue that there is a complete mismatch, so I can speak to this about a little bit, if you don't mind.

**Ben Cashore:** Yeah. Please do.

**Marina Kaneti:** Okay.

So, within the original framework of super wicked problems, the focus on time is meant to highlight the urgency in addressing irreversible processes of environmental degradation and the damaging effects of hampering biodiversity. The factor of time suggests that environmental challenges need to be treated differently from social challenges.

I will not elaborate on this. Please read Ben's work for that.

What is important here is that time is running out is a central construct and central concept where what's really important is for us to control our actions and also ensure that by controlling our actions, we can also ensure the continued survival of species.

In the context of the Belt Road projects, the factor of time can be applied directly to questions of biodiversity and environmental degradation.

A very well-known case, which received much attention over the last few years, and is constantly quoted in the newspapers, is the Tapanuli orangutan in Sumatra. The natural habitat of the orangutan is directly in danger by the construction of a flagship hydropower project in the area of Batang Toru. Here, the factor of urgency and time is running out, comes from the sheer fact that there are only 800 species of Tapanuli orangutan left, but of course the orangutan is just one of the better-known endangered species as of 2017 and now we're in 2021, so things are even worse. Belt Road corridors overlap with the range of 265 threatened species, 1,739 important bird areas or key biodiversity areas and 46 biodiversity hotspots around the world. So, how do we ensure protection of species and preservation of biodiversity in the current context?

And this goes both for Belt Road projects and beyond in nearly every country around the world. And certainly, in many of the Belt Road countries, environmental protection follows standard institutional mechanisms and procedures along with mandates for environmental assessment review. Typically, companies are not granted permits to operate until after such review has been completed.

In addition, legal cases can also be brought up against companies, typically challenging the validity of such reviews. And there are many examples where this is happening along the Belt and Road projects. Very well covered in Western media I would add.

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** However, neither of these mechanisms provide an inherent guarantee that the environment will be protected, let alone consider how questions of ecological sustainability will be factored in. In fact, in many cases, exactly the opposite seems to be the case.

Again, in Sumatra, in the Batang Toru case, a legal challenge was raised against the hydropower company and the proposed construction of the hydropower plant. Nevertheless, the Indonesian court dismissed the concerns for the orangutans' well-being, accepting the company's argument that the hydropower plant is located outside the forest and will not disrupt the natural habitat of the ape.



This essentially discounted any consideration of the fact that the preservation of the orangutan and all other species in this forest are more than just linked to a line on a map that should not be crossed. Again, positivism.

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** When it comes to constructing a hydropower plant, there are roads cutting through the forests, there's noise pollution, an increased number of people working in the vicinity of the protected forest.

What is even worse? The boundary that the court was assessing was only the latest in series of redrawing of boundaries over the last 50, 60 years

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** restricting the habitat even further in, if I may give another also very famous example again from the ground, that is the infamous construction of the port in Lamu, that's in Kenya, where the court, again, reviewed the disproportionate environmental impact and loss of livelihood to local fishermen resulting from the construction of this port and the whopping amount of over \$15 million U.S. dollars that fishermen should be compensated for the disproportionate environmental impact.

So, in recognising the impact on people and considering an appropriate “amount to compensate them”,

**Ben Cashore:** Right

**Marina Kaneti:** the court made no ruling concerning the damage to marine life or the impact on the ecosystem.

So, what is clear in both cases in Batang Toru and in Lamu, is that the existing institutional framework do not address the question of urgency or at best produce a calculus of mitigation and compensation. And of course, this goes beyond what China itself does and what the Belt and Road projects are involved. But it's important to consider the impact because that's something that's not discussed in the literature.

**Ben Cashore:** Thank you, yeah, a very fascinating discussion then of how this plays out on the ground. And it raises kind of two related questions. On the one hand, you've talked about China's role in creating this Belt and Road Initiative.

Now you are here, talking about countries who are involved in these processes, having some of their own impact.

I just see both negative and positive on the ecological questions. So, can you talk a bit more about what your research tells us about the nature of that relationship between China and its partners?

**Marina Kaneti:** Yes. So once again the framework of the super wicked problems, this is very useful because it prompts us to think and talk about the question of authority and responsibility, right?

**Ben Cashore:** Yes.

**Marina Kaneti:** And one of the things that comes across very prominently in a lot of the conversations and expectations from China is that because there's such a strong central government there supposedly is some sort of a central authority that monitors and directs the operations of Belt Road projects.

**Ben Cashore:** Okay, Yeah.

**Marina Kaneti:** And, it's almost at least in the literature, it almost appears as the opposite of the conundrum that's happening in the global governance world, where all the commitments are voluntary, there is no executive power. And when you're talking about climate change there is no necessary authority that has enough teeth to make commitments compulsory.

**Ben Cashore:** Yes.

**Marina Kaneti:** But actually, and again, this links to the examples of Batang Toru and Lamu that I just mentioned, it is a big mistake to think that the central authority is present in Belt and Road projects and that they're executed or administered under the vigilant eye of the central government.

And in fact, in the last, I would say year and maybe a little bit more than that, there have been multiple Chinese commentators and analysts who have tried to repeatedly explain that the fact that China is considered authoritarian country, does not translate into a scenario where companies march under the orders of the central government to the contrary, in the context of international investments including the Belt and Road projects, the central government has very little to do with companies' decision-making or their daily operations.

In fact, many will tell you that the Chinese companies operate 100% on the premises of profit making

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** and that is their basic bottom line.

There is another aspect of this, for example back to Batang Toru, there's a Chinese conglomerate that's involved there, Sinohydro pretty much very well known for the type of hydropower plant constructions that they do around the world, but they still operate independently from the larger umbrella company, which is PowerChina, as well as independently, from branches all over the world,

**Ben Cashore:** Okay.

**Marina Kaneti:** such structuring and part of the Chinese economic model makes all the decision-making independent from the central government agenda and even with the green Belt Road guidelines that just came out. I have seen information that a lot of the Chinese companies are pushing back against the government on even introducing suggestive guidelines as to how companies should be operating.

**Ben Cashore:** You know, that's fascinating too, because it does kind of confront our traditional expectations of the Chinese government controlling everything and planning ahead so many years. And you're saying, hang on a second, actually, authority is devolved in these projects, you're seeing that have effects on the ground in ways you wouldn't expect. Very fascinating.

I'm curious then about how you take that and consider then of course, this climate crisis that has led China to identify very legible positivistic goals, right? But yet, which as, you know, and many others have pointed out too, goal-based efforts over the last 30, 40 years have not been met overall.

So how do you take that, your conclusions around this dielectric effort that could be useful in some ways, generating insights and approaches and this ultimate concern that you know, we're gonna fall short of the goals we identify, the ideas we generate. How do we handle this and what do you recommend going forward?

**Marina Kaneti:** So, I have three recommendations. Let me see if I can fumble through them and see if these make sense to you.

**Ben Cashore:** Okay

**Marina Kaneti:** My first recommendation is kind of way of moving forward is that even though China is now pushing for a new discourse on the unity between mankind and nature, there's still significant work to be done on prioritising the environment. In this, I, by no means, want to say that China is alone in having to do this. In saying that the environment needs to be prioritised I'm sort of speaking to the whole world not just China and especially again, if we're thinking about the current institutional framework that allow us to think of environmental impact and environmental assessments and how insufficient they are in helping us deal with any types of interventions that happen, particularly to the Chinese situation, there's nothing in the current green guidelines or the ideological framing that suggests protection of the environment as urgent, immediate necessitating drastic actions. The approach from a long-term perspective and dissemination of China's best practices might not be the best way forward.

My second sort of way to move forward and something that we didn't talk about much, and I'm happy to, to speak to this more, has to do with this question of the will of the people and whose priorities and opinions should count?

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** So, you're very well familiar with all the conversations of, "oh, here's a Belt Road project, and people on the ground are protesting against it."

**Ben Cashore:** Sure

**Marina Kaneti:** and "thank God for the people who are kind of the community

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** that's against the Belt Road project".

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** At the same time, when, indigenous people in North America are protesting against a Canadian pipeline,

**Ben Cashore:** Yes.

**Marina Kaneti:** somehow it doesn't make the news.

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** But anyway, again I want to return back to the context of Indonesia in Batang Toru, where there were people protesting against the hydropower plant construction, but there were people who were anti protesting saying, "we want the hydropower plant construction, because guess what? We want to have electricity."

**Ben Cashore:** Yeah, Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** So, I think there's something very hypocritical and wrong with us thinking that first of all, people that are on the ground should carry the torch of opposition. Especially when their own livelihoods are so contingent upon more access to electricity

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** so that they can have education or have jobs and or have food on the table.

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** And so, the other portion of this is, you know, so China goes around and says, oh, we'll carry out the will of the people when we are investing in the Belt and Road project. So, who is the people? Is it the people who are protesting? Or the people who are agreeing? Is it the military that supports the hydropower plant construction?

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** Or is it the government? So, in this question of the will of the people has way too many stakeholders involved and too many different interests involved above and beyond China itself, but that needs to be in fact further.

And then the final question is a point that brings me back to my own approach which is more in thinking about how we speak about and how we represent things and how we see them in the world.

And particularly the ways in which attention is brought to environmental concerns associated with Belt Road projects. How are they made visible to the rest of us? And the ways in which a lot of times environmental damage itself remains hidden. So, in scholarly analysis and international news alike, there has been considerable attention to coal investments and carbon emissions associated with Belt and Road projects.

Nobody talks about the Marine life in the Lamu port. Sometimes, maybe they talk about the Tapanuli orangutans.

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** At the same time also, other aspects of environmental impact of the Belt and Road projects receive less attention and Chinese overseas engagements that are not Belt and Road projects are completely ignored. So deepwater fishing, for example, which is not part of the Belt and Road project, which is a huge problem from South China Sea, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, and the Chinese now are big in the deepwater fishing, never gets any attention. So, the disproportionate visibility on Chinese participation and endorsement of overseas projects has led to very limited visibility and accountability of equally harmful other operations and also operations by other actors, not just Chinese actors.

So, within the context of super wicked problems, the issue of climate change is characterised as a tendency to discount the future, right? To emphasise short-term gains over long-term solutions. So here this question of discounting the future as part of the Belt and Road projects can also be understood as a problem of invisibility

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** because in many cases, the detrimental impact of destruction of habitats in Marine life is not immediately visible.

**Ben Cashore:** Right.

**Marina Kaneti:** It will only be 10, 20 years from now, 30 years from now, when people will say, wait a second, there's no Marine life left. Everything is dead. So even though the number of species might dwindle the orangutan, the Tapanuli Orangutan will not be extinct overnight. So again, it's a question of visibility.

I want to finish on a little bit of a more positive note. As I mentioned, China's evolving position on climate change is quite fascinating. And although Beijing is often portraying these evolutionary processes driven by the wisdom of the party leaders, it is quite notable that many of the changes in government policies and particularly the most successful ones as I mentioned already, have been the product of consultative processes, criticisms and push by various critics. Be it domestic, such as issues of toxic waste and air pollution, or international such as on the issue of coal mining.

To this end, any thinking of the possibilities and venues to leverage China's own global ambitions and shape environmental approaches and sustainability mechanisms. It is important to keep in mind that demands for accountability, consultations and responsible actions are closely monitored by Beijing. As we have seen most recently, the language of the Belt and Road Initiative is already integrating a narrative of high quality and sustainability for the projects, which is in response to the ambition and vision set up by the U.S. build back better initiative. And so, my hope is that we can continue pushing China to develop its own vision for environmental world further.

**Ben Cashore:** Yeah. Dr Marina Kaneti we can go on for hours on this conversation. You've nicely illustrated to us and taken us on a journey from Borneo to the Belt and Road to China's domestic politics in really important ways.

**Marina Kaneti:** Thank you very much, Ben for all your fantastic questions.

**Ben Cashore:** Thank you everybody for joining us in this really important discussion. Please do refer to our website or subscribe to hear more of our 17th Anniversary Podcast Series.

The next and final episode will feature Dr Ng Kok Hoe, Head of the Case Study Unit and Senior Research Fellow of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. And we'll address the question of social inclusion in Singapore - are we there yet? Thanks so much.

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