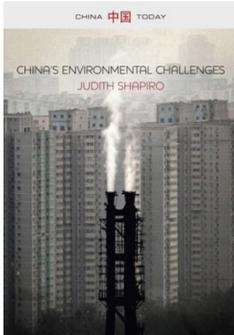


## REVIEW: *CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES*

Reviewed by Bill Bleisch (China Exploration & Research Society)



Judith Shapiro. 2012. *China's Environmental Challenges*. Cambridge: UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press. xxii+200pp, map, preface, index. ISBN 9780745663098 (paper 22.95USD, ebook 18.95USD).

Judith Shapiro's latest ambitious work picks up the story of modern China's checkered relationship with the environment at approximately the point where her previous study, *Mao's War Against Nature* (2001), left off. This latest book sets out to address questions of grave importance to China and to the world. The litany of challenges – poisonous water and toxic air, scarcity of water and other resources, deforestation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity – seem nearly insurmountable, despite evidence of considerable attention from the Chinese government and from China's public, and despite the rocket-like rise of China's economic power and political influence in the world. Shapiro adds to this list the growing problems with lapses in environmental justice, both within China and passed on to its neighbours and to the countries with which it trades.<sup>1</sup> Not only do growing environmental problems affect China's ability to achieve the government's stated goals of a 'harmonious society' with 'moderate prosperity for all,' but these problems, and the ways that

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<sup>1</sup> Shapiro specifies that environmental justice exists:

when environmental risks and hazards, and investments and benefits are equally distributed with a lack of discrimination, ...and when access to information, participation in decision making, and access to justice in environment-related matters are enjoyed by all (138).

China seeks to address them, are now widely recognized as having major impacts on the entire planet. Chinese demand has become a major factor in the pricing of the world's natural resources, while pollution from Chinese sources, particularly emissions of CO<sup>2</sup> and other climate changing gasses, are having global consequences.

Shapiro sets out to explain these impacts by examining the effects of the growth of China's population, its emergence as the center of global manufacturing, and the rise of China's middle class. She also explores the constraints imposed on China's leaders by domestic politics and by trajectories that reflect past history and the perspectives and expectations that arise from the particularities of Chinese culture. Shapiro uses the tools of development studies to examine the issues and the sometimes obscure forces that lie behind the responses of the Chinese government and Chinese society, too. Shapiro demonstrates convincingly that there are forces within the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party that are actively trying to deal with environmental problems, even if perhaps only because they realize that their power and the very existence of their institutions are threatened by popular discontent that can bubble over in so-called 'environmental mass incidents' – demonstrations, strikes, and even violent action sparked by dissatisfaction over environmental harm. In the author's words:

Indeed, the nation's environmental challenges are so severe and so central to the manner in which China will "rise" that it is no exaggeration to say that they cannot be separated from its national identity and the government's ability to provide for the Chinese people. (9)

The book opens with a Preface recounting anecdotes from the author's own personal experiences in China during the past four decades of momentous change. She arrived as a student in the summer of 1977 when the country was just beginning to emerge from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This personal account, filled with particulars, provides a contrast to the rest of the book, which is sweeping in scope. Throughout, anecdotes and

examples cause the issues to stand out in relief and make the book immediately meaningful and enjoyable to read.

The rest of the book is carefully organized around five 'core analytical concepts' – globalization, governance, national identity, civil society, and environmental justice. The author pulls no punches and the audience is obviously not China's leadership, although a few privileged experts may get the chance to read the book and absorb its recommendations. Rather, the book is designed to be used by instructors and students in a Western classroom setting.

The introductory chapter, subtitled "The Big Picture," includes a clear overview of the entire book. It also provides an accessible and interesting summary of the approaches of different academic disciplines to the study of environmental issues, contrasting how scholars might deal with the same issues through a regional-studies perspective, a comparative perspective, by focusing on a specific sector or policy, or through the lens of political science, environmental anthropology, natural resources economics, political ecology, environmental history, environmental economics, or environmental justice.

Shapiro effectively introduces the nuanced perspective on environmental issues that she demands of her readers; we are introduced to a government caught between contradictory agendas created by the need to provide real improvements in the lives of over one billion people, many of whom are still desperately poor, others of whom have recently joined the expanding ranks of a new middle-class. This growing middle-class is a key player but a fickle one, experiencing new-found prosperity and confidence but simultaneously demanding a healthy environment, at least in their own backyards, while creating exploding demand for consumer goods that can only be met by break-neck development. Shapiro effectively conveys the quandary of a bureaucracy for environmental protection that is tasked to implement some of the strictest and best designed systems of environmental regulations in the world, yet which has little power in remote areas, and no power at all over the powerful state-owned companies that often have close family ties to the leading elite.

Chapter Two, "Environmental Challenges: Drivers and Trends," introduces the broad trends of China's historical and economic development, as well as the main drivers that explain China's growing environmental challenges, such as population growth; consumerism and the rise of the Chinese middle-class; globalization of manufacturing, urbanization and the resulting depopulation of rural areas; industrialization; loss of farmland; and climate change. The chapter ends with a review of some recent environmental disasters and of citizen action and conflicts fuelled by discontent over growing environmental problems.

Chapter Three, evocatively entitled "State-led Environmentalism: The View from Above," focuses on governance, covering the legal and institutional framework for environmental protection in China, with its odd contrast of top-down authoritarian decision-making that gives rise to policies that are usually undermined by the 'implementation gap' created by the decentralized and often corrupt administrative frameworks at the local level. While lapses in implementation were once applauded as brave and clever moves used by local governments to spare their constituencies from the worst excesses of misguided central policy, the implementation gap in environmental policy now "stems at least in part from a political and social conflict between Western-style economic growth and a healthy environment" (169).

Chapter Four, "Sustainable Development and National Identity," covers the historical and cultural context that constrains the leadership's response to the growing conflict between the imperative for economic growth and for environmental sustainability. Shapiro delves into the fascinating question of the Chinese national identity and the 'quiet struggle' that rages over it. Deciphering China's response to its environmental crises requires an understanding of the key concept of 'face' and its extreme importance, particularly in international diplomacy. The Chinese people "seem at times to swing between jingoism, or pugnacious nationalism, and insecurity or what a psychologist might call 'low self-esteem'" (100). Perhaps surprisingly, this sensitivity over face may also have led to positive movement in addressing global environmental problems.

The Chinese government has repeatedly stated its commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection, and has backed this up by ratifying a number of binding international conventions, some of which have never been signed by the USA. Shapiro argues that, far from being an exercise in hypocrisy, the government envisions China as a leader in international efforts to solve environmental problems, and that this fuels real action: heavy investment in renewable energy; bold, if over-ambitious experiments with 'Green GDP;' and binding targets for reducing 'carbon intensity.' "There is thus a possibility that China's preoccupation with 'face' and national identity may yet be channelled in support of an alternative model that the world has not yet seen" (100).

Chapter Five, "Public Participation and Civil Society: The View from Below," emphasizes the history of the civil society environmental movement in China and the role that it has played in changing policy. There have indeed been several high-profile cases in which polluting companies have been shamed into compliance with environmental laws by public exposure, or in which government decisions were at least reconsidered in the face of civil society organizing. In China, however, Western analysts have sometimes been fooled by the effective self-promotion of NGOs into over-emphasizing the role of NGOs in China's environmental progress. It is important to remember that, in China, NGOs are never allowed to act as an alternative to the Party. NGOs are now largely left out of decision-making and probably never had as much relevance to China's progress in addressing environmental issues as they would like their supporters to believe.

China's NGOs often manage to do no more than get out in front of the parade on issues that the government has already decided to resolve internally. Environmental NGOs in China have often been most effective when they collaborate with the government and the Party, giving advice, piloting innovation, and taking risks to fulfil an agenda already approved by the government, unconstrained by the conservatism and politics that limit all bureaucracies. NGOs can tackle foreign companies, like Adidas, Apple, or Chevron, but are

rarely allowed to take on a company that has strong central level connections, such as a Huaneng, Huadian, or Sinopec.

Also, NGOs may be allowed to highlight the crimes of a corrupt local official already targeted for discipline, but can never expose the web of connections that might link a top official and his family members to a Chinese company guilty of environmental excesses. Rare exceptions may occur when China is participating in an international convention, such as CITES or the Convention on World Heritage. This provides powerful reinforcements, and may give a small measure of protection to an NGO, but blowing the whistle on China's misdeeds internationally holds the risk that it might be misconstrued as sharing state secrets and committing treason. As multi-lateral organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP have become more dependent on China's cooperation, they may have also become less willing to stand up for in-country whistle blowers.

While emphasizing the role of NGOs in China's progress on environmental issues, the book seems to have underplayed the importance of contributions from trusted experts, including a handful of international experts like Shapiro herself. As Link (1992) has pointed out, throughout China's history, intellectuals have felt compelled by traditional duty to advise their rulers, at times continuing to offer unwanted advice even when persecuted and accused by vested interests of disloyalty for their pains. Despite the risks, trusted advisors have had deep and lasting influence on China's environment, largely by working within the system. Regrettably, this important phenomenon in China is hardly addressed in the book, aside from a brief mention of the strange, but surprisingly influential hybrid beast – the China Council for International Cooperation in Environment and Development – which allowed domestic and foreign experts to communicate their recommendations directly to the State Council.

The sixth chapter, "Environmental Justice and the Displacement of Harm," may interest readers of *Asian Highland Perspectives* most. Using case studies, it examines in some detail how environmental problems, such as pollution and loss of agricultural land to mining and infrastructure have been moved from the vicinity

of the homes of the middle class to remote regions, either peri-urban areas, remote western regions, or abroad. This tendency to solve environmental problems by 'displacement of harm' is not unique to China. Shift of the costs of development from majority populations to minority people, from urban areas to rural areas, from the center to the periphery, from wealthy nations to less-developed nations, and from those of us alive today on to future generations, has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout the world. It is perhaps ironic, but also telling, that Han Chinese citizens living in coastal Fujian suffer from toxins brought in by foreign 'electronic' garbage imported to China for recycling, just as China's rural residents suffer from the effects of initiatives designed to protect watersheds and tourism hotspots that mainly benefit eastern urban residents.

Shapiro provides two case studies of regions where 'displacement of harm' has affected China's minority peoples; in Inner Mongolia and Tibet. Shapiro reflects the suspicions of many that the government's 'ecological migration' program, which promotes urbanization of nomadic herders in Inner Mongolia (and also in Tibetan areas) is motivated more by a desire to secure access to grasslands in order to expand mining, commercial ranching, and farming, than to eradicate poverty or protect fragile grasslands. She points out that the environmental damage that is attributed to herders is often caused by irrational government policies of the past and not by traditional practices that were based on indigenous knowledge and worked to preserve an ecological balance on fragile dry-lands.

The book next considers similar changes in Tibet. Despite a disappointingly one-dimensional and over-simplified summary of Tibetan history, Shapiro does a real service to the debate about the future of the Tibetan Plateau by framing it in the larger context of the general tendency of modern societies to shift the burdens of environmental destruction from people with influence to people who are more vulnerable. One caution here: the brief summary misconstrues the recent environmental activism by certain minority people in China as a political stance against encroachment by the Han majority when, in fact, the reasons for this courageous activism

may have more to do with the close relationship and spiritual attachment of many minority people to the land, connected with their long and continuing dependence on natural resources from mountains, forests, grasslands, and wetlands.

The emphasis on environmental justice in this chapter is important and valuable, but it may lead some Chinese readers to suspect that campaigners are using environmental issues as an entrée to open up the more controversial issues of human rights. Throughout the book there is a tendency to conflate ecological justice and environmental sustainability, which may do a disservice to both worthy goals. While the two are undeniably interrelated, it is not immediately obvious that they are necessarily linked – certainly some factions in the Chinese government seem to think that environmental sustainability can be achieved without addressing issues of injustice. Logically, does one necessarily follow from the other? Public participation, for example, often seems to hamstring decision makers who must answer to demands for unsustainable levels of resource exploitation in support of temporarily low prices. US institutions, for example, seem to be politically incapable of considering a carbon tax, even though many mainstream economists recommend this as the most efficient mechanism for achieving the goal of lower carbon emissions. EU ministers have recently been accused of caving in to demands from the fishing industry to allow unsustainable catch levels.

Shapiro also emphasizes China's institutional problems and cultural peculiarities to the point that readers could get the impression that these are the roots of China's environmental challenges. True, these particulars explain much about the trajectory of China's development and the sometimes perplexing response of the government to environmental crises. Are these the roots of the problems, however, or just constraints in China's ability to find solutions? Ultimately, the source of many problems lies in inherent flaws in the vision of the future that has been imported to China, along with luxury brands and MBA degrees. As Wolf (2013), chief economics commentator at the *Financial Times*, points out "...what used to be the energy-intensive lifestyle of today's high-income countries has gone global."

Other societies, dedicated to freedom and equality, seem quite capable of marching in step off the cliff of extinction, blindly following the free pursuit of a misbegotten dream of unrestricted consumption, and misled by a shared fantasy of never-ending economic growth. Ultimately, China and its critics will all need to face the simple fact of exponential arithmetic that the 'Western' model of prosperity may be inherently unsustainable, making the phrase 'sustainable development,' as currently envisioned, an oxymoron. No amount of transparency, public involvement, or accountability is going to make this problem go away.

The final chapter of the book, "Prospects for the Future," restates the dangers facing China, but wisely avoids the pitfalls of prognostication. The shelves of libraries are crowded with old books predicting the imminent collapse of China, most of which place part of the blame for impending catastrophe on the ever-growing list of China's environmental problems. None of their prophecies of economic collapse have been fulfilled, perhaps in part because Chinese leaders, or at least their advisors, actually read these books and did their best to adjust so as to avoid the worst of the problems laid out.

Instead, Shapiro clearly states the issues that must be dealt with and the decisions that must be made by China and the world if they are to deal effectively with shared environmental problems. These are the hard questions that have no win-win answers:

Do the Chinese people have an inherent right to the higher living standards enjoyed in the developed world? Are such standards even possible? ... In a world of increasing limits on resources and pollution "sinks," or repositories, is it even possible to build an equitable world in which people enjoy equal access to resources without taking them from successive generations, from the vulnerable, or from other species? (11)

With perspectives like these, this book often rises above previous attempts to cover some of this same ground, many of which are little more than expressions of outrage about the inequities created by China's failure to deal with corruption or a litany of complaints about the environmental problems that China's re-

emergence as an economic power has created for the rest of the world. China, through its meteoric rise, has highlighted the fundamental dilemmas that are now shared by all countries and all people. Shapiro ends each chapter with a list of four or five thought-provoking 'questions for research and discussion' that lead students through the complexity of the issues at hand and the difficulties of crafting solutions. Far from being exceptional, China is both a microcosm of the challenges and a laboratory for testing solutions to problems that we all share.

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