

# H-Net Reviews

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Judith Shapiro. *China's Environmental Challenges*. Chichester: Polity Press, 2012. 200 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-6091-2.

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## Clearing the Air about China's Environment

On August 3, 2013, *New York Times* Beijing correspondent Edward Wong published a highly personal column about the anxieties that come with living and raising children in the polluted environment of today's China. Residents of Chinese cities question the safety of the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food they eat. People live with atmospheric pollution so severe that the media has labeled it an "airpocalypse." Parents worry about tainted infant formula. Many feel "as if they were living in the Chinese equivalent of the Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear disaster areas." [1]

Judging from the frequency with which this article was posted, commented on, "liked," and shared via social networking sites, Judith Shapiro's new book *China's Environmental Challenges* is an extraordinarily timely one. Her concise, passionate, and informative volume deserves a wide audience among readers seeking to better understand the environmental consequences of China's development into the world's second largest economy. Shapiro's extensive experience living and working in China has endowed her with a deep awareness of the country's regional disparities, its ethnic and cultural diversity, and the array of state and non-state actors with a stake in China's environmental future. The author's highly accessible style, along with the lists of Internet resources and discussion questions included at the end of each chapter, should make this judicious and thoughtful book particularly useful for undergraduate teaching purposes.

Shapiro's important earlier work *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (2001) documented how human repression experienced in China between 1949 and 1976 went hand in hand with an attack against nature fueled by the same Maoist ideological principles. *China's Environmental Challenges* takes the story up to the present, detailing the resource depletion, industrial pollution, and numerous other environmental problems that constitute the "dark side" of China's post-1979 economic growth. The book is organized around the interlocking concepts of globalization, governance, national identity, civil society, and environmental justice, each of which serves as the main theme for one of its five core chapters. Within this framework, Shapiro skillfully addresses the monumental shift in China's global position over the past three decades; discusses how China affects—and is affected by—the global environment; and examines the country's prospects for ecological sustainability.

The book's contents hold particular urgency, because, as Shapiro puts it, "the planet cannot afford to wait for China to pass through the same stages of industrialization and clean-up followed in much of the developed world" (p. 41). Although the environmental crises that China faces are undeniable, she makes it clear that these challenges do not belong to China alone. Rather than singling out China as the world's worst environmental nightmare, Shapiro emphasizes that "China and the world are so intertwined that what happens in China not only impacts all of us, but what all of us do has an im-

pact in China” as well (p. 176). As China produces goods for the global economy, it extracts huge amounts of resources at home and overseas. Pollutants generated by this export production stay behind. China has become a “global manufacturing hub; yet ordinary Chinese suffer the negative impact of production in terms of reduced quality of life, prevalence of disease, and shortened lifespans” (pp. 2-3). An inordinate amount of this ecological harm falls on marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities in China’s border areas, rural farmers, and the urban poor.

On paper at least, China possesses a strong set of environmental laws and regulations. Aware of the economic costs of environmental degradation (reportedly 3-4 percent of China’s annual gross domestic product [GDP]), the central government’s national planning statements and official sloganeering stress the importance of “sustainable development” (*kechixu fazhan*). Yet implementation remains spotty, as “competing and conflicting emphases on growth, government legitimacy, clean development, and stability” make for “a confusing policy-making landscape in which actors sometimes work at cross purposes or with uncertain lines of responsibility” (p. 70).

Groups within the realm of China’s nascent civil society have grown more assertive in voicing their concerns about environmental degradation, especially as it affects human health and wellbeing. Shapiro optimistically asserts that a process in which environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in China “take the initiative, the central government provides legitimacy, and the media reports the results, has created a fragile but useful model for environmental groups” (p. 117). Unfortunately, persistent limitations on public participation and freedom of information present serious obstacles.

Rather than painting China as “all good or bad,” Shapiro has sought to “cultivate a nuanced appreciation for China’s historical moment, constraints, pressures,

and ambitions, and for the responsibilities of other countries” (p. 163). Overall, she succeeds admirably in her goal of writing a book that is helpful, inspiring, and not overly discouraging. The central message is that “China’s environment is beset by numerous interconnected and countervailing forces and pressures” (p. 167). There are signs for hope, as well as plenty of room for despair.

Where the book comes up a bit short, for this reviewer at least, is in its account of the “cultural and historical contexts in which [China has tried] to achieve sustainable development” (p. 79). Shapiro’s discussion of China’s current environmental situation holds great value, but the book has little to say about the far-reaching environmental changes that occurred in China prior to the mid-twentieth century. Thankfully, a growing literature on Chinese environmental history exists to help fill this gap.[2] To fully comprehend China’s present environmental challenges, one has to recognize that they result from a complex interplay between developments in the People’s Republic of China period (1949-present) and ecological patterns with far deeper roots in China’s past. These historical legacies will shape the options available to China as it tries to confront environmental issues on the national and international scale.

#### Notes

[1]. Edward Wong, “Life in a Toxic Country,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/sunday-review/life-in-a-toxic-country.html> (accessed August 4, 2013). Later in the month, on a cover emblazoned with the image of a dragon breathing smoke and fire across the earth, *The Economist* labeled China “the world’s worst polluter” and asked if the country “can clean up fast enough.” *The Economist* (August 10-16, 2013).

[2]. For a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of China’s environmental history, see Robert B. Marks, *China: Its Environment and History* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

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