

CHINA AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A State Affair or Affairs of the Planet?

Zoe Hughes, BA(IR) 2000 – 72%

Editor's Note

Since Zoe started work about 5 minutes after the final exam, she declined to update/modify her essay, but did ask that I include some comments about the reason for its mark. This essay was awarded 72% by the first marker and 71% by the second, with 72% as the final agreed mark. The comments indicate that this is a very well written and researched essay. Why did it not achieve 80% or more, which we would be more than happy to award? To quote from the comments 'your bibliography and essay indicate a far greater engagement with China than with the environment (and Green Thought) and International Relations (and the challenges green issues present). Clearly you cannot do everything, but for me, tipping your hat to these concerns did not go far enough.' To avoid an epidemic, I might add that whilst this essay begins with an excellent quote, this is not necessary and will not, of itself, gain marks.

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“‘Well in our country’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing!’
‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place’. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1870)...
Things may be even worse than we think... as we actually fall further behind in spite of some rather impressive running.” (Smil, 1993b)

As we witness the dawn of the 21st Century, so too do we witness environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale. Never before has the media been filled with such tidings of woe. Oil tanker spills, power station leaks, gas clouds, smog-filled cities, holes in the ozone layer, severe climatic changes. The list has been getting longer as the years pass by, as well as becoming increasingly more global in scale. Indeed, among many, there is an assumption that environmental degradation in the 21st Century is a global phenomenon – and that one day its impact will be felt everywhere regardless of its place of origin. One looks to most environmental textbooks or journals and one is presented with an immediate recognition that the environment and the politics that surround it are of global significance. That the environment is now a genuine global security concern. However there are some actors that do not recognise such a position, that the environment is fundamentally a state affair, its use to be dictated by the state government, and not via international regimes. One such example is China, indeed many would argue that it is the best example to cite. Since the environment was legitimised as an issue area of concern among nations in 1972ⁱ, China has emerged as one of the most aggressive and articulate opponents of any binding environmental convention. (Economy in Schruers and Economy, 1997) And this reluctance to protect the environment goes hand in hand with one of the worst environmental records in the world. Where only six out of twenty-

seven major cities have water within government safety standards (Dupont, 1998) and where the combustion of more than 1,000,000,000 tons of coal, largely uncleaned and burned with minimal or no air pollution controls, supplies three-quarters of all primary energy. (Smil, 1993a) China is already a nation of serious environmental degradation, and its rapid industrialisation program poses a serious potential threat to the global environment. Indeed many would argue that China's environmental affairs should be the affairs of the planet. However China's response is interesting. Throughout almost three decades of environmental negotiations and growing scientific evidence supporting links between environmental degradation and global climatic change, China has rarely changed its mind. Thus in the 21st Century we ask ourselves again, can the environment be assessed beyond the boundaries of the nation state? The task of this essay is to ask that question with specific reference to China – that is, is it right to argue that China's environmental degradation is a global concern?

With more than 1.3 billion people, the fourth largest land mass in the world and one of the most impressive records of rapid industrialisation, China makes an interesting environmental case study for scholars of International Relations. Indeed the statistics say it all. China has one of the most energy intensive economies in the world, and within two or three decades its pursuit of economic development will make it the world's leader in carbon-dioxide (CO₂) emissions, the most important greenhouse gas. (Nielsen and McElroy in McElroy et alⁱⁱ, 1998) The smoke burden today in major Chinese industrial cities such as Chongqing is significantly worse than it was in London during the pea-souper of 1952. (McElroy in McElroy et al, 1998) And some scholars state that not long ago a United Nations' (UN) inspection committee brought a set of instruments to China to study pollution levels. As soon as they turned on their instruments at Beijing Airport, the needle swung right off the dial and the instrument stopped working. (He, 1991) This incident is said to have since become an international joke. Yet it is not just from air pollution that China suffers. Prior to 1972 there were no environmental laws in the People's Republic (Economy in Schruers and Economy, 1997) thus helping to make its entire river system into a mere waste disposal unit. Jin Hui in particular cites two examples highlighting the plight of such environmental degradation, and the degree to which it was carried out.

“In Chongqing the white foam released from a nearby paper mill is now referred to by locals as ‘white ducks’. The term was coined, oddly enough by Prince Shihanouk of Cambodia. While on a tour of the Jialing River some twenty years ago, the then-Prince asked his guide what the white forms floating on the water in the distance were. His Chinese guide answered that they were flocks of white ducks. Twenty years later the white ducks are still there, day and night.” (in Dai, 1998)

But it is perhaps the example of No 403 factory on the Gezhouba Reservoir, Yemingzhu Port, along the Yangtze River, that is most indicative of the state of China's environment:

“A major polluter, the No 403 factory, which produces ship engines, releases waste oil into the reservoir via a network of small brooks. When the accumulation of oil on the surface of the reservoir is particularly heavy, nearby farmers skim off a few jars, pour it into their tractors and drive off.” (in Dai, 1998)

These examples are perhaps the best way of illustrating the severity of China's environmental degradation, more so, I believe, than statistics. Indeed one could spend the rest of this essay describing, through such examples, pollution of one sort or another within the Middle Kingdom. However, that is not the purpose of this essay. What I aim to

highlight though is that in spite of China's environmental record, as illustrated above, and even the consensus of its own scientific community that such degradation will have detrimental global effects and thus affect economic potential in the long-run, (Economy in Schruers and Economy, 1997) the Middle Kingdom has remained a committed advocate of environmental state-centricity.

Since Stockholm 1972 China has played a significant part in more than 180 international environmental forums. (Chayes and Kim in McElroy et al, 1998) Some scholars would use this to argue that China has accepted the environment as a global concern and thus accepts the need for global action. Yet when one looks to the country's comments during these negotiations one gets a very different picture. As Elizabeth Economy argues:

“(During the Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee talks in the mid-1990s) The Chinese delegates... remained committed to only a general framework convention that did not include the delineation of specific responsibilities or commitments for the signatories, especially with regard to curtailing emissions of the principle greenhouse gas CO₂... Moreover, Chinese officials rallied the developing states behind their position in an attempt – in large part successful – to establish a united front for bargaining with the advanced industrialised countries.” (in Schruers and Economy, 1997)

Indeed when one looks closely at the strategy of the Chinese leadership one sees that of classical Realism, promoting non-interference in the sovereignty of a nation-state and above all protecting the nation's interests. As China's Beijing Declaration of 1991, published during the negotiations for the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) indicates:

“The FCCC currently being negotiated should clearly recognise that it is the developed countries which are mainly responsible for excessive emissions of greenhouse gases, historically and currently, and it is these developed countries which must take immediate actions, with time-bound targets, to stabilise and reduce such emissions. Developing countries cannot be expected to accept any obligations in the near future.” (cited in Chayes and Kim, in McElroy et al, 1998)

Developing countries cannot be expected to accept any obligations – an explicit proclamation of non-interference with the environment of a sovereign state. And this is again used in China's Environment and Development Report 1992, submitted to the preparatory committee of the UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio. ‘Every country's sovereignty must be respected and there must be no interference in one another's internal affairs in the course of international cooperation.’ (quoted Wu et al, in McElroy, 1998) The environment thus becomes a resource to be exploited, and in due course maintained, at the direction of the state government.

Whether or not degradation is promoted or reduced is up to the leaders of the nation-state. Not a decision to be made within international environmental regimes, which would involve an abrogation of authority to an institution on issues such as standard setting, monitoring or enforcement. (Elliot, 1998)

Many reasons have been discussed in an attempt to explain China's position over the past three decades. Indeed many articles focus on China's stand as a rejection of green imperialism and the construction of global environmental problems.ⁱⁱⁱ A moral high ground that ties in quite appropriately with China's history of foreign imperialism. Yet for most scholars the Middle Kingdom is using its sovereignty trump card merely to protect rapid economic growth. Ever since it emerged from the nightmare of massive

political upheaval that was the Cultural Revolution, China has accelerated ahead with economic reform. The first two decades of reform saw double-digit growth rates as the norm, rates that are now steadying off at a very respectable seven to eight per cent GDP growth year on year. (Economist, 2000) And as we move into the 21st Century economic growth is still China's main priority, as Deng Xiaoping's famous saying goes; 'To get rich is to be glorious'. Indeed the support of Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng for economic development and their relative lack of attention to environmental issues were critical to the limited nature of the responses eventually adopted by the Chinese. As one Chinese official involved in climate change policy-making process said: "Since Deng says economic growth must increase, CO₂ will also increase". (Economy, in Schruers and Economy, 1998) And this philosophy has changed very little since the early 1990s. Despite a vast array of environmental laws and regulations being implemented in China, the environment continues to deteriorate owing to the focus on economic growth. As Richard Louis Edmonds states:

"There has been strengthened determination to deal with environmental problems in the 1990s, but environmental policy continues to be held back by priority for economic growth." (Edmonds, 1999)

This is illustrated by the polluter-pays principle within the People's Republic. Polluters actually pay less than a fifth of the overall pollution control expenditure and state-owned enterprises, often the main target of the pollution discharge fee system, are usually exempted owing to their poor economic health. In Chongqing municipality alone, eighty-two 'difficult enterprises' were exempted from pollution charges in 1989, and all textiles enterprises were exempted in 1993 owing to a poor economic climate. (Panayotou in McElroy, 1998) It is as the Economist argues in its survey of development and the environment:

"Eager to appear 'green' to an international audience, they (developing countries) pass strict environmental regulations, but do nothing to enforce them."
(Economist, 1998)

This is especially the case in China. The environment and the management of it are being sidelined as a result of deliberate policies pursued to accelerate the country's industrialisation. And it is this acceleration of industrialisation that is causing concern among neighbours, indeed among most nations of the world. China is already a major contributor when it comes to global warming emissions, heavy metals and CFC gases, which may contribute to global climate change and ozone layer depletion. Just three years ago it was calculated that by the early years of the 21st Century China would have become the world's largest producer of acid rain, and the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. (Breslin, 1997) China's progress is already causing problems for its neighbours, particularly Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Some thirty-three per cent of sulphur dioxide deposits on South Korea are identified as Chinese in origin, and Japanese sources calculate that China generates fifty per cent of the sulphur emissions that cause acid rain in Japan. (Breslin, 1997) It is also thought that one-third of the acid pollution in Taiwan is caused by the mainland. (Edmonds, 1994) And it is here that we find the cause of China's adherence to state sovereignty. If this pollution was regulated through regional or international agreements, it could only hinder Chinese development policies. As was argued in China's 1992 Environment and Development Report:

"For developing countries such as China, the prerequisite to accomplishing the harmonious development of their economies and environments is to achieve economic development. Only when the economy reaches and maintains a certain level can a country afford the conditions and capacities necessary to coordinate

resource use, environmental protection and the development of the economy and the society.” (Wu et al in McElroy et al, 1998)

China is thus unwilling to impede its economic development by allowing external environmental agreements to dictate how it should operate its environment. If China were to abrogate sovereignty over the environment, the first victim would be industrialisation. The potential for degradation from an expanding Chinese economy is immeasurable, as the Economist jokes, ‘Climatologists dread the day when a billion or so Chinese can afford cars.’ (1998)

But jokes aside, can we actually view the state of the Chinese environment as a concern of the planet? As the Chinese government is eager to tell the UN, ‘there must be no interference... in the course of international cooperation’. The environment within the Chinese territory can be exploited at the will of the nation-state. However as I have demonstrated, environmental pollution is often transboundary and global in nature. The causes of environmental degradation in any one state can lie outside that state, indeed the impacts do not recognise the porous borders of sovereign states. Just ask Japan, South Korea or Taiwan. So by logic we must assume that environmental concerns are affairs of the planet. Unfortunately, as any International Relations scholar will admit, the international system does not work by logic alone, but by a system of sovereign nation-states. And it is national sovereignty, or at least the claiming of it, that is often interpreted as the main barrier to global environmental cooperation and the achievement of the kinds of agreements that are required to address environmental degradation successfully. (Elliot, 1998) As Lorraine Elliot argues:

“We achieve lowest common denominator agreements shaped as much if not more by political and economic compromises as by environmental concerns. Consensus demands also ensure that the negotiation process is often lengthy with final agreements cobbled together hurriedly in the final hours of the final days.” (Elliot, 1998)

Lowest common denominator agreements such as UNEP, UNCED and the Commission on Sustainable Development. So once again we ask, is the environment, in particular the Chinese environment, a state affair or affairs of the planet? A critical theorist would argue that despite all the proclamations and declarations of the Chinese government, the environment is a global security concern. That China is obviously responsible for part of what could prove to be a threat to the entire planet. (He, 1991) That the actions of 1,300,000,000 people do matter. However a reformist would say that what we are actually witnessing in the 21st Century is far removed from this critical stance. What we see is a system of fragmented nation-states, where sovereignty remains the fundamental organising principle. A principle that should be taken as the given framework for action. As such environmental action would continue in the manner that it has been doing since Stockholm. Thus I would argue that 21st Century environmental politics is not about global affairs. It is politics acted out upon the stage of nation-states, by politicians that say what we should (or more likely what we should not) be doing to protect the environment, and more importantly it is about a defined territory, with boundary lines drawn on a map.

NOTES

ⁱ Most scholars would agree that 1972 marked a watershed in international relations with the United Nations’ Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. According to Lynton Caldwell it was the

turning point in developing a new paradigm in environmental thinking, and so creating a place for environmental issues on many national agendas where they had previously been unrecognised. (Economy and Schruers in Schruers and Economy, 1997)

ⁱⁱ McElroy et al's *Energising China* (1998) is an excellent guide to the environment in China. During my research I found it to be one of the most comprehensive studies of the Chinese environment, analysing various issue areas from the impacts of industrial growth, desertification, water shortages, through to the effectiveness of domestic environmental policy and China's involvement in international agreements.

ⁱⁱⁱ A particularly good read on the globalisation, and subsequent narrowing, of the environmental agenda can be found in Wolfgang Sachs (1993) *Global Ecology*, especially the chapter by Vandana Shiva, *The Greening of the Global Reach*.

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