

## Book Review

**Judith Shapiro. *China's Environmental Challenges*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012.  
205pp. (ISBN 9780745660912)**

Judith Shapiro is perhaps best known for her account (with Liang Heng) of China's tumultuous Cultural Revolution: *Son of the Revolution* (Vintage 1984). Here, Shapiro explores China's environmental challenges in an eminently readable monograph. Although readers may already be familiar with the broad outlines of the problem (e.g.-polluted lakes and rivers, creeping desertification, the scourge of "cancer villages"), the author forges new ground both in her analytical approach and, perhaps, her guardedly optimistic view of China's environmental future.

Shapiro acknowledges that China's large environmental footprint has effects that extend far beyond the nation's borders, and so should concern us all. However, Shapiro argues for a focus on the domestic roots of China's environmental dilemma to better understand both causes and possible cures. In doing so, Shapiro employs five core analytical concepts or themes to explore the complex interplay between China's growing economy, a large population, and environmental degradation. These are: globalization, governance, national identity, civil society, and environmental justice. "These themes intersect and overlap, complement and reinforce, exacerbate and diminish one another in complex ways," (168) she cautions. They cannot be viewed in isolation from one another.

Globalization, Shapiro stresses, is a two-way street. China's rapid growth and growing domestic consumer demand necessitates an ever-increasing flow of resources and goods into China, which

sometimes negatively impacts the global environment. However, China as a center of production for the world economy also generates much pollution and environmental harm at home, as factories struggling to cut corners to remain competitive intersect with weakly enforced local environmental laws. The West plays a role, too, in exporting hazardous wastes to China, particularly in the form of used consumer electronics. Entire Chinese villages eke out a living disassembling computers and the like for trace precious metals while dealing with highly toxic chemicals on a daily basis.

Governance also directly impacts China's environmental challenges. Although China is "a top-down, centralized, authoritarian state" (57), Shapiro detects signs of hope. In particular, Shapiro points to the increasing prominence of environmental sustainability issues in central government planning documents. In 2007, to take but one example, China's leaders pledged to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by forty percent from 2005 levels by 2020 (63). Shapiro also notes that China has become a world leader in renewable energy technologies such as wind energy production. Citizens groups have been granted some freedom to form around environmental issues and have score limited successes in, for instance, enhancing transparency or opposing harmful construction projects. Still, Shapiro notes that China's overall enforcement of environmental laws remains weak and local governments and corrupt local leaders too often flaunt central government directives on the environment, especially where such directives might interfere with potential profits.

National identity plays its own complex role in China's environmental challenges. On one hand, economic growth and success feed the desire of many Chinese to regain their status as residents of a powerful, respected nation. On the other, China's leaders feel pressure not to be seen as irresponsible stewards of the global commons. Interestingly, Shapiro thinks the Chinese could draw upon traditional Chinese culture to encourage greater sustainability. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, Shapiro notes,

all contain eco-friendly themes that could be employed to promote a modern ethos of environmentalism in China.

Shapiro next discusses the role of civil society. Despite difficulties confronting independent citizens groups wishing to organize under Chinese law (for instance, such groups are required to obtain official government agency sponsorship), a number of environmentally-focused NGOs are active in China. They have employed traditional “weapons of the weak” such as gathering and disseminating information to challenge and prod an often lethargic state apparatus. Journalists using social media have proven especially effective in this regard. The Chinese government has, in part, responded to such pressures from below by creating and sponsoring its own (yet strong and independent) environmental NGOs, and Shapiro notes that international NGOs such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace are increasingly active in China.

Social justice concludes Shapiro’s analysis. In Shapiro’s eyes, social justice and environmental justice are inextricably linked, for without the former “the extraction of resources all too often simply displaces harm across time and space...concealing the costs of our consumption” (135). This phenomenon can be seen all too frequently in China. China’s urban middle class has increasingly and successfully demanded cleaner and healthier communities to live in, and outside observers sometimes point to this as a welcome sign of a growing environmental consciousness. However, all too often the main culprits of urban pollution, such as landfills and incinerators, are simply relocated to the city outskirts where they harm China’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens. By no coincidence, China’s infamous “cancer villages” (villages where the incidence of cancer is exceptionally concentrated and high, and where death rates sometimes exceed birth rates) are typically found in rural areas with “cheap labor and lax environmental laws” just outside wealthy cities (144). So, too, Shapiro warns of the harm being done to minority ethnic populations living on China’s periphery. Shapiro faults the

Chinese state, in particular, for sacrificing minority rights in favor of large-scale resource-extraction projects whose benefits rarely accrue to the populations most directly affected. Such contradictions, Shapiro warns, must be resolved for true environmental sustainability to exist. Leaving such contradictions unresolved risks impoverishing future generations and generating popular protests that could destabilize the state.

Shapiro rejects easy solutions. The reader is reminded frequently that multiple interconnected factors have produced a complex environmental reality. Still, Shapiro knows the final goal should be a state “where Chinese citizens feel empowered to help preserve and enjoy a clean environment” (173). Domestically, she speculates that ancient traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism) could combine with newer convictions (social justice, national aspirations to portray China as a positive force in world affairs) to produce a more environmentally secure nation. On the international side, Shapiro recommends a more nuanced approach that emphasizes offering China encouragement and aid. Rather than simply critique China’s shortcomings, for instance, Westerners should praise Chinese officials in international forums when they act responsibly on behalf of the environment or allow greater freedom of expression for citizens’ groups in China. The West should also continue to share its clean technology and expertise, and perhaps engage in some soul-searching of its own regarding Western practices that contribute to environmental harm and hinder social justice.

Shapiro writes with great clarity and an underlying sense of moral urgency. Each main chapter concludes with thoughtful discussion questions to prompt further deliberation. Accessible and concise, *China’s Environmental Challenges* is suitable for undergraduate courses in a wide range of disciplines. Advanced scholars can benefit from the book’s theoretical approach.

Reviewed by

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