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Judith Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*,  
Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012, 205 pp.

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# Judith Shapiro, *China's Environmental Challenges*,

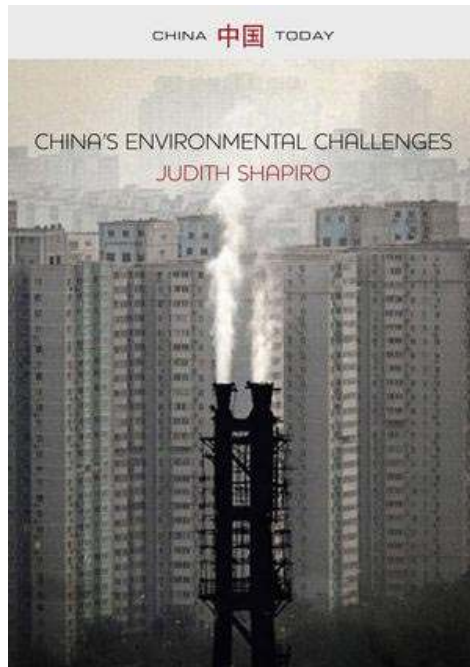
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- In the decades since the late 1970s, China has become a manufacturing powerhouse for the world. This has helped improve the lives of its population, but major repercussions on its environment have drawn the attention of Western scholars in diverse disciplines since the 1980s. Judith Shapiro's book is part of this trend. She already published a book on this issue in 2001 (*Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge University Press). While that work focused on the Maoist period, her latest offers a panorama on the issue from the launch of reform and opening to the present time. The author was studying Chinese language and civilisation (Master of Asian Studies) at the University of California when she was selected to teach English in Hunan Province in 1979. After returning to the United States two and a half years later, her career took a turn towards Global Environmental Politics. She has since been teaching at the School of International Service at American University (Washington, D.C.).
- China's Environmental Challenges* takes the form of a manual for students specialising in environmental policy or contemporary China but also for anyone interested in the



subject. Its 205 pages (plus preface) are divided into seven chapters. Each chapter ends with a series of questions and several links to websites so the reader can take the discussion further. The book thus has a highly didactic aspect. It is based on a compilation of secondary sources, Internet sites specialising in environmental issues in China and elsewhere, articles, documentary films as well as some personal interviews and communications addressed to the author. The environmental theme is dealt with using a multidisciplinary approach (political science, environmental anthropology, human geography, environmental history, and economics of the environment) centred on five key analytical concepts: globalisation, governance, national identity, civil society, and environmental justice. The introduction describes the environmental problems and challenges facing China. Chapter 2 details the factors affecting the country's natural environment: over-population, the rise of the middle class, globalisation and industrialisation, urbanisation and the diminution of arable land, as well as climate change. Chapter 3 looks at the institutional and legal framework of China's governance system. Chapter 4 focuses on national identity and the possibility of creating a sustainable Chinese model of development. Chapter 5 examines the emergence of a civil society and the population's participation in the country's political orientation on environmental issues. The penultimate chapter raises the issue of equity and of the displacement of environmental harm towards poorer regions of China and the world. Finally, by way of conclusion, the author offers paths China might pursue as well as a reflection on the role developed countries may play.

- 3 In the context of debate over the increasing depletion of natural resources and the influence of human activities on the planet, what is China's stand and what role does it play? By opening up to the world and to market economics, China has reaped unprecedented growth. On the other hand, the effects on the environment and people's well being stemming from this development model (air and water pollution, soil erosion, threats to wild fauna and flora, and impact on human health) and their effect on the rest of the planet are increasingly apparent. It has become crucial to question China's development model, the factors influencing the environment, and the manner in which the country is dealing with its problems.
- 4 In Chapter 2, the author recalls the rapid growth of China's population during the Maoist era and the linkage between overpopulation and environmental degradation. The rise of the middle class is a more recent phenomenon inciting fears as well as hopes. Its choices and modes of consumption tend to imitate those of the populations of developed countries, with a negative influence on the environment. Nevertheless, better education and information and consciousness of the need for a less polluted environment could pressure the state to take steps in the right direction. Even so, are resources sufficient to meet the Chinese population's basic needs so that a sufficiently large middle class can influence the state's decisions? Is the state able to ensure implementation of its decisions? China has become the manufacturing hub of the world, but it is neither the sole beneficiary nor sole victim. Its development benefits the developed countries to which its finished products are exported, to the detriment of the developing countries that supply raw material. These countries, including China, also receive junk for recycling, adding to their pollution issues.
- 5 Chapter 3 examines the political structure and legislative system dealing with environmental issues. China has taken part in major international conferences on the environment and has signed or ratified many treaties. In 2008, the *State Environmental*

*Protection Administration* – SEPA – became the Ministry of Environmental Protection, a sign of increased attention devoted to the issue. China also acquired a series of laws on environmental protection deemed to be among the most exhaustive. However, many obstacles stall their implementation. Apart from recurring problems linked to weak grasp of laws or lack of competence within bureaucracies and legal institutions, there are also structural flaws. China's quasi-federal administrative system is a form of fragmented authoritarianism based on verticality and horizontality (*tiaokuai* 条块). From a functional standpoint, there is, as in the case of environmental protection, a vertical hierarchy; the Ministry of Environmental Protection presides over a pyramid of agencies and services. But territorially, the Ministry is confronted by a competing horizontal level of authority held by provincial and local governments. Further, governmental organs face contradictory pressures – maintaining economic growth and the Party's legitimacy or the country's stability and pursuit of sustainable development.

- 6 In Chapter 4, Shapiro turns to the issue of Chinese national identity, which she sees gripped by conflicting feelings of pride over a glorious past and humiliation at defeat by Westerners. Thus the strategies favoured by the Chinese state would be motivated by a desire to re-conquer what it deems its rightful place on the global chessboard. To attain this objective, should it adopt a Western model or propose a new Chinese model? This is not a new question but one that has been posed since the late Imperial era. Aware of the flaws of the West's past strategies of growth and environmental management, many Western scholars have voiced the hope that China could propose a different model based on its long and rich philosophical tradition, especially in its representation of humans and their place within nature. While the author seems to abide by this vision, she offers no solution as to how it might be realised.
- 7 Shapiro then looks at how the population perceives the environmental question and the possibilities for citizen participation. Freedom of association was highly circumscribed under Mao, social organisations having been entirely under state control and obliged to maintain surveillance over the population. Despite a relaxation with Deng Xiaoping's arrival at the helm, the registration of associations remained subject to strict regulation, necessitating supervision by a government organ. Since 2008, pilot projects have begun to take shape in some cities, offering the possibility of registering directly with civil affairs departments. Among registered NGOs, the most numerous are dedicated to environmental protection. In fact, although this is a sensitive subject, it is less so than human rights. As in other developing countries, environmental protection is a Trojan Horse in China, allowing for the introduction of a larger debate on democracy. Alongside NGOs, there are also GONGOs (Government Organized NGOs), non-profit associations set up by governmental agencies or by their members. Despite this affiliation, such organisations can play a not insignificant role in environmental protection. NGOs' actions take the form of mobilising opinion using new communication technologies, social networks, the media, and protest movements. Protests worry the state, raising fears over the country's stability and the Party's legitimacy. While citizen activists are recruited from all social strata, Shapiro notes that movements initiated in cities and led by those from the middle classes, who are more educated and organised, have a better chance of success than those led by farmers.
- 8 Inequality in the ability to raise demands between urban and rural residents, between people in China's coastal regions and those in the interior, between Han Chinese and

ethnic minorities, as well as between China and less developed countries, is discussed in the penultimate chapter. The notion of environmental justice takes into account extraction of natural resources, exposure to various forms of pollution, access to information, and participation in the decision-making process. It goes with the notion of displacement of environmental harm. In fact, if citizens' associations succeed at times in blocking industrial projects inside major cities, all that results is relocation to the periphery or to rural areas. Furthermore, concessions to the imperatives of environmental protection, such as the logging ban, have merely shifted the pressure of damaging activities from China to Southeast Asia and elsewhere. The impact of China's resource extraction activities outside its territory has been the subject of lively debate. There are those who point to positive effects of such activities accompanied by development assistance projects (road infrastructure, hospitals, and schools), but others see them only as means for greater exploitation of host countries' natural resources.

- 9 While China has gradually managed to join the ranks of key global actors, this new position requires a special orientation towards sustainable development and protection of the global environment. In Shapiro's view, China can and should play the role of a modern laboratory in order to promote reflection on other paths to development. Throughout the book, Shapiro has tried to develop a highly nuanced vision of the Chinese case in order to integrate and accompany the country's efforts towards a more environment-respecting development model.

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## AUTHORS

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