

Book Guide

Toxic Politics

In *Toxic Politics*, CFR Senior Fellow Yanzhong Huang discusses how China's environmental crisis is undermining public health and becoming an Achilles heel in its reemergence as a global power.

Summary

In *Toxic Politics*, Yanzhong Huang delves into the environmental health crisis that has beleaguered the Chinese state throughout its dizzying economic development. Environmental degradation in China has not only brought a wider range of diseases and other health consequences than previously understood, it has also taken a heavy toll on Chinese society, the economy, and the legitimacy of the party-state. Dr. Huang presents new evidence of China's deepening health crisis and challenges the widespread view that China is winning the war on pollution. Although government leaders are learning, stricter and more centralized policy enforcement measures have not been able to substantially reduce pollution or improve public health. Dr. Huang connects this failure to pathologies inherent in the institutional structure of the Chinese party-state, which embeds conflicting incentives for officials and limits the capacity of the state to deliver public goods. *Toxic Politics* reveals a political system that is remarkably resilient but fundamentally flawed.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- Environmental Policy
- Global Public Health
- Chinese Politics and Public Policy
- Chinese Foreign Policy

Discussion and Essay Questions

Courses on Environmental Policy

1. What is unique about China's environmental challenges as compared to those experienced by Western countries?
2. What role does citizen feedback and NIMBYism play in China's environmental policy process? How does this role differ in other parts of the world?
3. Unlike in Western countries, most of the environmental public interest litigation (EPIL) lawsuits in China have been initiated by government departments and local procuratorates. Why have environmental NGOs played a limited role in using EPILs to enforce environmental laws in China?
4. Between 2013 and 2018, China cut concentrations of PM2.5 by 46 percent, a measure which took the United States approximately twenty years to achieve after its passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970. Is this evidence that "China's version of capitalism" is winning?
5. To what extent has the tension between economic growth and environmental protection hindered China's shift away from its dependence on coal for energy and on heavy industry in order to drive its economy?
6. What drivers have restricted the effective use of market mechanisms in environmental protection in China?
7. Supporters of eco-authoritarianism or environmental authoritarianism argue for the inevitability and necessity of nondemocratic measures in dealing with environmental degradation to combat climate change. Is this argument substantiated by the case of China's pollution control?

Courses on Global Public Health

1. What are some of the main linkages between the environment and public health? What is the largest single

environmental health risk in China?

2. Why is ambient PM2.5 the number one risk factor for pollution-related mortality in China? What has been the leading contributor of deaths caused by ambient PM2.5 in the country?
3. To what extent can water and soil pollution contribute to a food safety crisis?
4. What are “cancer villages”? What makes the phenomenon different from the cancer clusters identified in other countries?
5. Why is garbage disposal a major environmental health problem? Why has China’s ban on imports of “foreign garbage” become a global governance concern?
6. How does China’s size and economic might factor into the health effects of environmental degradation?
7. Can you identify parallels between China’s pollution control campaigns and its response to the COVID-19 outbreak?

Courses on Chinese Politics and Public Policy

1. How can China’s response to environmental health issues serve as a springboard to examine the resilience of the Chinese state?
2. How do environmental health challenges affect China’s national economy and create volatile sociopolitical situations?
3. How has China’s opaque and exclusive authoritarian system prohibited social forces and international actors from influencing policymaking in the country?
4. After reading this book, are you convinced that decades of reform and opening up have shifted China away from the impromptu and undemocratic policy-making processes characteristic of the Maoist era? Why or why not?
5. How has the recreation of a bandwagon polity under Xi Jinping altered the institutional aspects of policy implementation in China?
6. To what extent should the phenomenon of *cengceng jiama*, to impose additional targets and requirements at every lower administrative level, be viewed as a byproduct of the authoritarian governance structure in China?
7. Why do local officials tend to adopt a cookie-cutter approach to implementing central directives?

Courses on Chinese Foreign Policy

1. How have international trade and investment contributed to environmental degradation in China? Why is environmental degradation in the country bad for other countries, including the United States?
2. What roles have the United States and international organizations played in democratizing air quality data and elevating pollution control on the Chinese government’s agenda?
3. To what extent has China’s push for pollution control promoted a more cooperative approach toward global efforts to combat climate change?
4. In what ways do China’s enormous environmental health problems represent both a challenge to and an opportunity for China’s engagement in global governance?
5. Is China’s Belt and Road Initiative a backdoor to outsourcing pollution?
6. To what extent can a major internal challenge like an environmental crisis translate into a stumbling block in China’s rise?
7. Given the consequences of China’s environmental health crisis and the limited effectiveness of the state response, is letting China sink an effective way to maximize U.S. competitive advantage? Why would it be in the United States’ best interest to cooperate with China on environmental and public health issues?

Supplementary Materials

Elizabeth Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China’s Future* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

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Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro, *China Goes Green: Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet* (Polity Press, 2020).

Genia Kostka and Chunman Zhang, "Tightening the Grip: Environmental Governance under Xi Jinping," *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 5 (2018).

Anna Lora-Wainwright, *Fighting for Breath: Living Morally and Dying of Cancer in a Chinese Village* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

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Minxin Pei, *China's Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi, *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

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