

Book Guide

## The River Runs Black

In this book, CFR Senior Fellow Elizabeth C. Economy uses historical research, case studies, and interviews with officials, scholars, and activists in China to provide insightful analysis of the economic and political roots of China's environmental challenge as well as the evolution of the leadership's response. Teaching notes by the author.

### Summary

China's spectacular economic growth over the past two decades has brought with it skyrocketing pollution and a dramatic depletion of natural resources. Environmental degradation in China has also contributed to significant public health problems, mass migration, economic losses, and social unrest. *The River Runs Black* argues that China's leaders have patterned their environmental protection efforts after reforms that have been largely successful in developing the economy: devolving authority to local officials, opening the door to private actors, and inviting participation from the international community while retaining only weak central control. The result for the environment, however, has been a patchwork of protection. A few wealthy regions with strong leaders and international ties have improved their local environments, but most of the country continues to deteriorate, sometimes suffering irrevocable damage. The book suggests that proactive policies backed by effective local enforcement could still avert an environmental crisis, but that if China does not change course, the implications for the country's future development are dire. The book concludes by outlining three possible projections for the future: a best-case scenario, a continuation of the status quo, and further environmental deterioration.

The book examines environmental issues in China through a policymaking lens. It is written in a clear style accessible to either undergraduate or graduate students and would be appropriate for use in a broad range of courses focusing on either environmental policy or China.

### Discussion and Essay Questions

#### Courses on International/Comparative Environmental Policy

##### Discussion Questions

1. Until very recently, China's policymakers regularly stated that, as a developing country, China should focus on economic development first and environmental cleanup later (if at all). Assess the validity of this argument for China and for other developing countries. Are there conditions unique to China that make this position untenable? What does this claim mean for other developing countries' environmental protection efforts? For addressing transnational environmental problems such as global warming?
2. Where does China stand with regards to its most pressing environmental issues, including water scarcity, air pollution, and desertification? How does China compare to other countries, either past or present, at similar stages of their development?
3. What steps did China take as it first began participating in international environmental organizations and regimes such as the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment, the UN Environmental Programme, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species? How has this participation affected China's environmental protection efforts? How has China's participation been similar or different to that of other developed and developing countries?
4. As China has opened its economy over the past two decades, why have the country's regulatory structures failed to prevent environmental degradation? What measures are being taken to address these shortcomings? Are they likely to be effective?
5. What part have multinational corporations played in contributing to and/or ameliorating China's

environmental challenges? As the country's economy has opened up to allow increased participation by foreign firms, is China importing international best practices or are companies simply exporting their most polluting processes?

6. How have environmental Nongovernmental Organizations in China been involved in pushing for broader political reforms such as democratization? To what extent is this a positive byproduct of growing awareness of environmental issues? In what ways might it be counterproductive?
7. What is the relationship between China's State Environmental Protection Agency and local Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs)? Between EPBs and other branches of local government? What is the role of local courts in arbitrating and/or solving environment-related disputes?
8. How does the scarcity of resources dedicated to environmental protection systems in China manifest itself at the national and the local levels? How could the system be redesigned to address concerns such as corruption and conflicts of interest more effectively? Are any aspects of this redesigned system applicable elsewhere in China or internationally?

## Introduction to Contemporary China

### Discussion Questions

1. How have historical trends and philosophical and religious movements influenced attitudes in China regarding the relationship between human beings and the natural world? How do these historical antecedents relate to the policies of Mao and his successors?
2. What part have environmental issues played in the development of civil society in China over the past two decades?
3. Why do environmental protection efforts in China exhibit such wide variation from region to region? In what ways do these variations in environmental protection parallel regional disparities in economic development?
4. Which environmental problems are of the greatest concern to the central government leadership? To local government? To the Chinese public? To other countries, both those sharing borders with China and those farther abroad?
5. Which of the three scenarios presented in the book's final chapter is most plausible and why?

## China's Foreign Policy

### Discussion Questions

1. Many of China's most severe environmental issues, including acid rain, sulfur dioxide emissions, dust storms, and water-borne pollution, do not respect national borders. What role should China play in controlling transnational environmental problems that originate in China? What role should other affected countries play?
2. China's increasing demand for timber and subsequent ban on domestic logging has led to major deforestation in a number of countries in Asia and beyond. What is China's responsibility as an increasingly important consumer of natural resources? Is it living up to this responsibility?
3. What has China done to engage with international environmental organizations and regimes like the Kyoto and Montreal protocols and the UN Environmental Programme? How strong an effect does this participation have on China's response to environmental challenges? How do China's leaders leverage this participation and incorporate it into the non-environmental dimensions of China's foreign policy?
4. How does China's environmental foreign policy approach compare to and differ from its foreign policy approach on other issues?
5. What lessons have Chinese Communist Party leaders taken from the involvement of environmental organizations in the collapse of Communism in former Soviet states? Is the environmental movement in China analogous to that of Eastern Europe and elsewhere? If so, in what way?

## China's Domestic Politics and Policies

### Discussion Questions

1. What incentives do local officials have to enforce central government environmental protection laws and regulations? What disincentives? Are these measures effective? As local leaders react to unfolding

- environmental disasters, for whom are they responsible, and by whom are they held accountable?
2. With local newspapers more aggressively reporting pollution, information about environmental issues is spreading more broadly than ever before. What is the significance of the dissemination of this information? What might various differing voices within China's central government have to gain or lose by allowing the release of information concerning environmental problems?
  3. What are the common features of cities that have been successful in combating environmental degradation? Are any based on conditions or incentives that could be replicated elsewhere?
  4. What part have environmental issues played in the growth of civil society in China? How might the environmental movement relate to broader policy reforms such as transparency and good governance?

## Economic Development of China

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the relationship in China between environmental challenges and economic development goals? How have China's responses to environmental issues paralleled the country's economic policies? What options do China's leaders have to enact environmental protection policies that less closely resemble their economic development blueprints?
2. How serious is China about quantifying the economic costs of environmental degradation? What are the obstacles to creating and implementing a viable Green GDP accounting system? Who in China stands to gain and lose by putting such a system in place, and how might it be used?
3. Assess the relationships at the local level between state-owned enterprises, government organs, environmental protection bureaus, and courts. How does this relationship create conflicts of interest and the possibility for corruption?
4. What impact is China's accession to the WTO having on the environment? Will further integrating China's economy into the international system lead to more robust environmental protection?

## Environmental Issues in China

1. Among the many environmental challenges China faces—water scarcity, air pollution, desertification, rising illnesses, and many others—which are the most dire? As government leaders set their legislative and administrative priorities, which issues must they place atop the list and why?
2. What is the relationship between environmental degradation and public health issues in China? How are these issues affected by the lack of timely public access to information?
3. As China's policymakers address concerns over water, they face the overlapping problems of pollution and scarcity. What types of policies can they pursue that address both issues simultaneously? How are these issues related to large-scale water projects such as the Three Gorges Dam and the South-North Water Transfer Project?

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