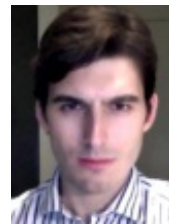


Book Review: China's Environmental Challenges

by Blog Admin

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*China's huge environmental challenges are significant for us all. They affect not only the health and well-being of China but the very future of the planet. In this book, noted China specialist and environmentalist **Judith Shapiro** investigates China's struggle to achieve sustainable development against a backdrop of acute rural poverty and soaring middle class consumption. **Stephen Minas** recommends this stimulating read to students of all levels, which benefits from Shapiro's personal insights and the historical and cultural context in which she places current issues.*



China's Environmental Challenges. Judith Shapiro. Polity. April 2013.

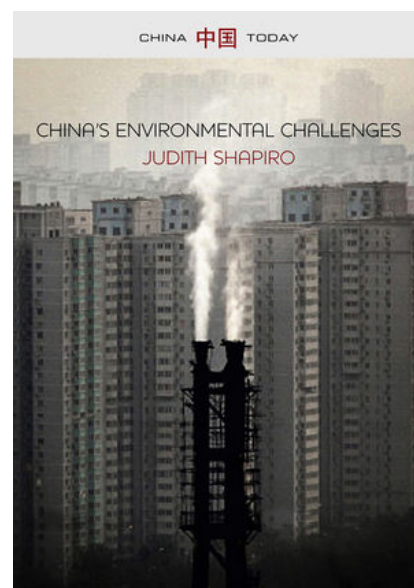
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In January, as a hazardous smog settled over Beijing, [the state-run China Daily](#) editorialised: 'Beijing has a goal of building itself into a world city. What is a world city? It should definitely not be a city that has most of its winter days shrouded in smog.' As China's new leadership pursues further development and talks about a 'China dream' of 'national rejuvenation', China's environmental problems are running up against increasingly high expectations. With China the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, how these problems are addressed matters far beyond China's borders.

China's Environmental Challenges is a timely overview of China's environmental politics, written by an expert in both aspects of the topic. A professor of global environmental politics at American University's School of International Service, [Judith Shapiro](#) is also a China specialist with in-country experience going back to the beginning of the 'reform and opening' period under Deng Xiaoping. In 1979, Shapiro went to China as one of the first forty Americans admitted to teach English (and became the sole foreign teacher at a Hunan university, 'the first since a Russian language teacher had been expelled in 1960 after the Sino-Soviet split'). In the time since, Shapiro has taught and researched at a Chongqing university and has written widely on China's politics and environment.

China's Environmental Challenges is an introductory textbook, which Shapiro has said is intended to fill a gap in university courses on both contemporary China and environmental affairs. The book is organised thematically, with chapters centred on the concepts of globalisation, governance, national identity, civil society and environmental justice. Each chapter concludes with a set of questions for research and discussion, together with a helpful list of (mostly online) resources for those who wish to explore the topics further.

The text draws on a variety of theoretical lenses (including anthropology, political ecology and different schools of political theory and international relations) to explain the dynamics of China's environmental politics. This multidisciplinary approach serves to acquaint the reader with some of the key approaches to the topic in the academic literature, while never detracting from the compelling material on China's environmental problems and the actions of government, citizens and civil society.



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Shapiro outlines the factors behind these environmental problems in the chapter on 'Environmental Challenges'. While the venerable Chinese environmentalist [Qu Geping](#) and other analysts have focused on the effects of population growth, Shapiro also identifies factors like the dramatic growth of Chinese manufacturing during the reform period, land use changes, and climate change as key drivers of pollution and degradation. China's status as the world's 'manufacturing powerhouse', with some 94 per cent of exports in recent times being manufactured products, is cited to draw a direct link 'between China's problems and our own lifestyles'. Concerning the loss of arable land to urbanisation and other land use changes, Shapiro notes that China's 1.3 billion people must make do with only five per cent of the world's water resources and seven per cent of its arable land. Shapiro identifies climate change as both 'an outcome of environmental change and a major cause of it', with threats ranging from extreme weather events to desertification and glacier melt.

Acute pollution problems have provoked some drastic responses from government, from shutting down Harbin's water supply following a [benzene spill in upriver Jilin](#), to the seeding of the clouds over Beijing to [improve the weather for the 2008 Olympics](#). In the chapter on 'State-led Environmentalism', Shapiro examines the Chinese government's broader environmental policies and the factors that have shaped them. Shapiro credits the central government for giving sustainable development increasing prominence in key policy documents like the current five-year plan, successfully reducing energy intensity and 'doing much more on climate change than it is required to do under international law'. Shapiro argues that 'environmental issues have climbed toward the top of the domestic agenda', pushed by a 'growing public clamour about the impacts of pollution on health and quality of life' and pulled by environmental policy entrepreneurs within government.

One such policy leader has been the environmental official Qu Geping, whom Shapiro credits with securing the passage of China's Environmental Impact Assessment Law and with bringing about a 'green hurricane' media campaign that exposed thousands of polluters. Pan Yue, a Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) vice-minister and the official who championed of the 'Green GDP' project, warned as early as 2004 that 'China's population, resources, environment have already reached the limits of their capacity to cope. Sustainable development and new sources of energy are the only roads we can take'. However, as Shapiro cautions, MEP is a 'weak institution' relative to primarily economic agencies like the powerful National Development and Reform Commission.

Moreover, even where there is support within government for an environmental measure, 'the government cannot simply say the word and implement a law or policy'. Indeed, Shapiro gives examples in the chapter on 'Public Participation and Civil Society' of government agencies cooperating with environmental NGOs to pursue shared goals. NGOs can thereby become participants in the 'pulling and hauling' of bureaucratic politics (to use Graham Allison's phrase). Overall, Shapiro reports strong civil society engagement with environmental issues, with campaigning journalists, resourceful NGOs – and rapid change. In 2009, one researcher visited Yunnan province with a list of NGOs compiled two years previously, only to find that over seventy per cent of the groups on his list no longer existed. For every official like Qu Geping who believes that environmental regulation requires 'supervision from the bottom up', there are others who view NGOs as irritants.

Throughout the book, Shapiro examines China's environmental politics critically, but she does so with sympathy and an appreciation of China's successes as well as its challenges (as might be expected from someone who can recall 'how people lined up for hours when the first post-Cultural Revolution Western film, "The Sound of Music", was released for viewing'). Ultimately, Shapiro sees the potential for China to be 'a modern laboratory for designing a new path' of sustainable development. Much will depend on that potential being fulfilled.

Students new to the topic of China's environmental politics should find this book a fascinating introduction. *China's Environmental Challenges* also has much to offer readers who are familiar with the subject matter, not least Shapiro's personal insights and the historical and cultural context in which she places current issues.

Stephen Minas works on international engagement in the State Government of Victoria, Australia. Stephen holds an MSc in International Relations from the LSE, where he studied on a Graduate Merit Award, and Honours degrees in Law and History from the University of Melbourne. The views expressed here are the author's own and not those of the Victorian Government. [Read more reviews by Stephen.](#)