

BOOK-REVIEWS

Toxic Politics: China's Environmental Health Crisis and Its Challenge to the Chinese State.
By YANZHONG HUANG. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 264 pp. \$29.99 (paper).

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The Chinese Communist Party is full of confidence in exporting its model to the developing world, primarily due to the country's remarkable economic growth in the past few decades. By focusing on the environmental issue, an essential question in contemporary Chinese society, Yanzhong Huang's new book contends that the "China Model" is fundamentally flawed despite its resilience. Essentially, he argues that a top-down authoritarian regime lacks responsive and accountable mechanisms (institutions), both at the central and local level, to protect the environment. Specifically, Chinese authoritarianism prefers short-sighted growth and stability to long-term public goods such as environmental protection. Chinese-style governance, characterized by top-down mobilization and complex inter-agency coordination, is not effective in enforcing environment-relevant policies, especially when local governments have a weak fiscal capacity. The party-state system also leaves insufficient space for social forces to share the burden of protecting environments. This book fills a gap in our understanding of both the foreign policy community and Chinese politics, demonstrating that the environmental health crisis poses a serious threat to the rise of China, in terms of both its domestic legitimacy and its international influence. The political sensitivity of Chinese environmental issues make it challenging to collect systemic data on the subject. The book is theory-oriented, and the author supports his arguments with evidence. He compiles some fascinating data on subjects such as significant environmental-health-related mass incidents from 2005 to 2017, coal production and consumption. These first-hand data strengthen his arguments significantly, as well as paving the way for future research.

This book has several strengths that deserve more discussion. First, it presents a clear and accurate diagnosis of China's environmental crisis. The author's persuasive arguments, supported by rich data, reveal two false current assumptions about China's current environmental health crisis, one of which is overly pessimistic and the other overly optimistic. Based on his comprehensive and objective description of China's current environmental crisis, Huang shows that China's response to this challenge is institutionally problematic. Secondly, he defines the Chinese approach to environmental protection as a campaign-style enforcement initiated by the central government. He further demonstrates that this strategy provides no sustainable solution to environmental issues. The top-down approach deals with environmental issues by squeezing out civil society and market forces. This hierarchical system escalates the financial burdens of local governments who then disincentivize protecting environments by institutional means. The book also discusses the "institutional innovations" adopted by the Chinese government to improve environmental governance. For example, since 2007 the government has appointed local heads of government as the "river chief" to improve transboundary river governance in Taihu Lake. This administrative innovation helps to contain river pollution by reducing the coordination costs of different areas and imposing accountability horizontally.

Reading this well-written and timely book provokes thought and inspires further research. It makes me wonder whether Chinese-style administrative innovations such as “river chief” manage to reduce pollution while resisting political reform. It seems as if the Chinese government turns the table on several pollution problems. Based on recent evidence, strong authoritarian regimes show their willingness and capacity to address environmental issues. So the real puzzle is how a party-based authoritarian regime responds to these challenges without formal accountability mechanisms such as elections. The author hints that a centralized vertical bureaucracy can motivate low-level public officials to follow the rules. However, it also suggests that local governments face a financial obstacle to reforming high-pollution industries. It is worth exploring what contributes to this variation of pollution control across local areas. Does local financial capacity moderate this vertical pressure? Do local industries play an essential role in affecting the local regions’ policy-making processes through lobbying or informal connection with local political elites? Further, despite the institutional limits, we do not know whether campaign-style environmental protection strategy elevates the public’s awareness of environmental protection. In other words, I am eager to know whether public opinion and knowledge about environmental degradation affect the responses by local governments. If the public’s rising concern about environmental protection somehow affects the policy-making process of the Chinese government, this can be considered informal accountability. In sum, this excellent book opens a Pandora’s box of interesting questions about the Chinese policy-making process.

This book engages with an important research topic, examining the rise of China from the perspective of its domestic weakness in tackling environmental protection. It is a fascinating book for a diverse audience in the field of China studies and foreign policy. Despite a plethora of scholarly works on Chinese politics and foreign policy, it succeeds in finding a fresh approach to this puzzle and makes an innovative contribution to the study of China’s environmental protection.

Invisible China: How the Urban–Rural Divide Threatens China’s Rise. By SCOTT ROZELLE AND NATALIE HELL. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020. 248 pp. \$ 27.50 (cloth).

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In *Invisible China*, Rozelle and Hell answer three questions: why is rural China so behind? How does the urban–rural divide hinder China’s future development? And what can be done to minimize the dangers China faces today? They argue that rural China’s underdevelopment lies in its human capital crisis, caused by a lack of high-quality secondary school education. Human capital is critical in keeping countries growing and thriving, and a country cannot sustain itself without robust high school education. In rural China, education is usually ignored. Poor access to high school education in rural areas leads to severe polarization in Chinese human capital. This urban–rural educational polarization can bring economic shock to China, which could cause social unrest that challenges the CCP’s legitimacy. An economic shock for China would also harm the global economy. This human capital crisis in China can drag the country into the middle-income trap, which is the biggest threat to China’s development.

Why do some countries make it through middle income without slowdowns, while others get stuck in the trap? Rozelle and Hell compare two different countries, focusing on a successful