

as ex-prisoners, are specifically targeted for *dibao* support. Another significant finding is not only that this makes little difference in terms of targeted groups' likelihood to (re-)offend, but also that this support does have negative consequences for those who administer the programme, as it leads to increased complaints from the community.

The ideas of seepage and repressive assistance are both interesting contributions, and the book might have benefited from discussing these in more substantial detail together rather than spread out through the text. Seepage is an intriguing idea and it would have been interesting to see more discussion of the switch highlighted by Pan in the 2000s and what explains this. *Dibao* was, from its first emergence in the early 1990s through to the 2000s and beyond, a programme that has been used to ensure stability. The language of officials highlighted in Pan's analysis is similar to that of officials justifying *dibao* in the 1990s. The way in which the Chinese state becomes concerned about different groups over time and how it utilizes different policies to facilitate control over these groups is the main contribution in this regard and fits with observations from the existing literature and from the field. Another way that Pan's work might help us understand the development of *dibao* is the question of why China implemented a rural version of *dibao* in 2007. While, on its own, the rural *dibao* does not really make sense, the argument presented here does provide a convincing reason for pushing through additional social assistance measures in China's countryside. The key point is that through repressive assistance the provision of material benefits is not the most important aspect as far as the state is concerned; rather, it is the increased opportunities for interactions between agents of the state and the targeted population which matter and which are facilitated by *dibao*.

The book is an interesting mix of innovative and more traditional methodological approaches and serves as a good example of how researchers might go about analysing complex problems and sensitive issues in China. The openness with which Pan discusses her methods, the challenges therein and how she came across the topic is to be applauded. Too often texts skirt round the discussion of methods and the specific challenges that studying a country like China present. Pan makes observations, for instance regarding the temporary nature of the internet or stumbling across a new topic, which might seem obvious to those of us who have experienced a government website revamp or the moment where a more interesting research question emerges in the field. These insights as well as the use of innovative approaches to particular questions, for example in chapters three and six on "Reacting at the threat of disorder" and "Triggering backlash" respectively, will be useful and encouraging to researchers new to the field. Those of us with more experience might consider learning a bit from such approaches as well.

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China's Environmental Health Crisis and Its Challenge to the Chinese State

YANZHONG HUANG

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In *Toxic Politics*, Yanzhong Huang examines environmental degradation in China and the limits inherent in the institutional structure of the Chinese party-state.

Huang is a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he directs the Global Health Governance roundtable series. He is also a professor and director of global health studies at Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations. The theme of "toxic politics" runs through Huang's book. He argues that the party-state system is fundamentally flawed due to limits in state capacity and deeply embedded perverse cadre incentives. Owing to these resulting gaps and deficiencies in the policymaking and implementation system, China will not win the "war on pollution," despite the state's commitment to tackle the environmental health crisis.

The book is structured into two parts. Part one of the book situates the study through analysis of the health, economic, socio-political and foreign policy impacts of environmental degradation in China. Part two examines government responses by analysing environmental health policymaking and policy implementation processes. It looks specifically at the role of the Ministry of Environmental Protection (now Ministry of Ecology and Environment), subnational governments and the use of environmental campaigns, and it evaluates the effectiveness of the party-state's policies by comparing goals against outcomes. The book concludes that the Chinese state is fundamentally flawed because of numerous shortcomings of authoritarian decision-making and, as such, the China model does not offer a viable alternative to liberal democracy.

This is a timely book, factually grounded and adopting a multi-disciplinary analysis. The author makes an important point showing that stricter and more centralized policy enforcement measures are not necessarily always effective, and they bring about new and different challenges. Huang argues that these new top-down policy tools are often compromised by China's decentralized policy structure, a weak environmental regulation regime, an underdeveloped market society, and tightened political and social control under Xi Jinping. The book summarizes many of the known flaws in China's implementation system: absence of reliable indicators, conflicting demands from superiors, multiple flaws in the cadre evaluation system, "buck-passing polity," ad-hoc campaigns and insufficient space for civil society. As a result, environmental policy implementation stays incoherent, varies drastically across regions and is temporally unsteady.

The great merit of this book lies in the vast empirical detail Yanzhong Huang provides. He combines evidence on environment, public health, public policy, comparative politics and international relations. China's environmental health crisis is perhaps the most important test for the resilience of the Chinese state. It is an interesting read, not just reporting on China's multiple environmental health problems – well-worn territory – but showing how China is not well equipped to tackle them, despite the range of sharp authoritarian instruments at hand.

Huang's outlook on China's prospects in tackling these challenges is pessimistic. He concludes that China will be unable to reign in pollution and environmental degradation within its borders and is also incapable of assuming a leadership role on climate and environment at the global level. To underline his argument, Huang points to China's mixed performance in the environment and health fields, and links it to severe shortcomings of China's political system and bureaucratic capacity. With tightening social and political controls, the author sees little hope of a shift and argues that the growing public frustration about environmental pollution has the potential to morph into a larger socio-political crisis threatening regime survival.

Notwithstanding the many strengths of this text, the main arguments could have been developed more consistently throughout the book. While Huang argues that the novel aspect of this analysis is that it looks at bureaucratic capacity in China

and examines how a changing institutional context “alters the opportunities and constraints faced by the policy actors” (p. 20), a more structured discussion on the exact opportunities and constraints would have been helpful. At times, the book includes claims that are broad without strong supporting evidence. For instance, Huang argues that China will not rise globally “if its people continue to breathe polluted air, drink toxic water, and eat tainted food” (p. 186). This is something of a head-scratcher because China *has* risen over the past decades despite domestic environmental pollution. Nevertheless, Huang’s assessment that the Chinese state is both resilient and fragile is of course true and fits nicely in the global debate on the implication of China’s rising power for the global world order.

In sum, Huang has made an important scholarly contribution to our understanding of the Chinese state’s bureaucratic capacity to tackle its continuing environmental health crisis. The book’s main takeaways on the limits of China’s state capacity are as timely as ever in the current Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic we have seen that there are strengths and limits to China’s coercive state capacity – the state used its centralized power to make decisions quickly while local governments implemented the “zero-Covid” mandatory lock-down policies very fiercely. While Beijing demonstrated its state-directed mobilization and coercive capacities, the top-down response came at high social and economic costs. Huang makes an important point that despite China’s high state capacity and mandate-driven implementation capacity, it is unclear if it has sufficient mobilization and cooperation capacity to address the environmental health problems in the near future. Huang’s book combines rich knowledge and profound insight about China’s environmental health crisis and it should be treated seriously by those interested in understanding more about the Chinese state’s environmental health crisis and government response.

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Chinese Environmental Law

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Chinese environmental law, like many things in China, has undergone dramatic change in the reform era. Early research on this area of law documented China’s burgeoning environmental crisis and the frequent failure of law on the books to translate into genuine performance in practice. Scholars have thoroughly documented the institutional and political dynamics that led to weak legal implementation and enforcement. In the last decade, China has substantially elevated the policy priority of environmental protection. Leaders have vigorously promoted a notion of “ecological civilization” and sought to transition China’s economy toward “high-quality” growth. This shift in priority has been accompanied by a torrent of new environmental laws, regulations, administrative measures, judicial interpretations, plans and policies. The level of activity has been difficult even for specialists to track.

In this context, Yuhong Zhao’s book, *Chinese Environmental Law*, is an indispensable treatise on Chinese environmental law that documents both historical