

Environmental Politics in China: An Issue Area in Review

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Abstract This article takes a thematic approach to review the existing literature (in both Chinese and English) of environmental politics in the broad context of China studies. Examined themes include state and environmental governance, public awareness and environmental social activism, and environmental foreign relations. Findings and arguments are assessed with two important questions in mind: What differentiates the environmental arena from Chinese politics in general? What new insights into Chinese politics can be gained from case studies of environmental protection? Scholarship on environmental politics contributes not only empirical findings, but also critical challenges to the conventional knowledge and frameworks of Chinese politics.

Keywords Environmental Politics · Chinese Politics · Environmental Governance · Environmental Movement · Environmental Foreign Relations

It should be said at the outset that this article is not entirely an intellectual history. Rather, it takes a thematical approach to review the most important findings offered by the existing literature that to an extent define the field of environmental politics within the broad context of China studies. The themes are the state and environmental governance, public awareness and environmental social activism, and environmental foreign relations. They are reviewed with two particular questions in mind: What distinguishes the environmental area from politics in general in China? What do studies of environmental protection tell us about Chinese politics that otherwise would have not been known?

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A note is needed to clarify the scope of this review. This article surveys and compiles a list of the most relevant literature on environmental politics in China in both Chinese and English published between 1976 and 2008, including articles from core journals, book chapters, and books (see A Survey of Literature on China's Environmental Politics under References). Chinese journal articles were accessed through the China Journal Net Full-Text Database. Literature on environmental politics in general is not included in the list but appears elsewhere in the References. The list does not include scholarship that is strictly environmental science, history, legal studies, management, or policy analysis, **though these disciplines are closely connected to political science**. A few exceptions are made with carefulness, most of which are pioneering works on the topic written in a highly interdisciplinary manner. Constrained in length, this review does not go into detail about specific environmental issues. Energy and climate change are treated as two of the many issues; however, each has generated its own political dynamics which are different from more classic environmental problems such as pollution control, nature conservation, and sustainable agriculture. To give a detailed review of the literature and research on these two topics is beyond the goal of this article.

A major challenge to producing this review is to treat the literature in both languages at once. The intellectual historical origins and development of Chinese scholarship on environmental politics are different from those in America or Europe. To review them separately would be to write two articles sharing one title. The thematical approach chosen here focuses more on the similarities and disagreements in the substance of research rather than contextual background. When the article goes through the main research questions and arguments under each theme, references from both languages will be cited whenever appropriate.

A Brief Intellectual History

Comparative political studies of industrial pollution and environmental degradation in general emerged in the 1970s, and international relations scholars picked up the topic later, in the mid-1980s [247, 301]. Political science literature in English on China's environment remained very limited until the mid-1990s. The primary reason for this delay is that research access to mainland China and scholarly exchanges between Chinese academics and the outside world were almost cut off between 1949 and 1978. During those three decades only a handful of American geographers had experienced China first-hand, while no Chinese geographer visited the United States ([102], Preface). Most of the earliest interview-based social science studies on contemporary China written in English would not have been feasible without a research facility located outside of mainland China, the University Service Center for China Studies based in Hong Kong [292].

Vaclav Smil's opening remarks in his book *The Bad Earth*, a pioneering examination of China's environment, vividly and insightfully describe the status of knowledge on the topic in the West by the end of the 1970s ([154], Preface):

During the early and mid-1970s, newspaper, magazine and television reporting, numerous China travelogs and, unfortunately, not a few papers in

scholarly journals created a **twofold impression** of the Chinese environment in Western minds. The one was of pre-1949 China—dirty and desolate, with barren hills and spreading deforestation, poor farming practices, low crop yields, and widespread soil erosion; with congested, ugly cities and primitive, pollution industries. The other was a Maoist miracle—clean and cheerful, with green hills and massive afforestation, ever-improving farming techniques and rising yields, soil erosion well under control, cities lightened by broad, tree-lined boulevards, and industries carefully preserving pure air and water.”

Smil, who published his first article related to China’s energy in 1976 and volumes of scholarly work covering deforestation, desertification, water, and biodiversity in the coming three decades in fact did not visit the country until after having completed the manuscript of *The Bad Earth* in the fall of 1982. Like many of his contemporaries who published on China in English in the 1970s and early 1980s, **he relied primarily on the information and data from *Ren Min Ri Bao* (People’s Daily) and other official newspapers.** Fieldwork, personal interviews, and even survey research methods became possible only after the mid-1980s. With a quick glance at the introduction of recent publications, particularly on social mobilization and environmental protection, one could sense the intensive nature of fieldwork now common to researchers in the field (e.g., [15, 53, 56, 92, 104, 111]). Much has changed with respect to the methods of research on environmental issues in China since the time described by Smil. However, it is fair to say that this field is young and it emerged at a time when both common sense and social sciences inside and outside China were affected, to different degrees, by the profound ideological divide defining the Cold War era.

Before Smil’s publications, there was little literature in English on the overall status of environment in modern China except a few studies of forestry, irrigation, and other environment related sectors [120, 129, 131, 167]. Lester Ross’s writings are among the first to start the inquiry into environmental governance, policy-making, and regulations [134–136, 139]. Two publications dated in 1998—the special issue of the *China Quarterly* on China’s environment, edited by Richard Edmonds, and the first issue of the *China Environment Series* produced by the Working Group on Environment in U.S.-China Relations (now the China Environment Forum) based at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars—marked the new phase of studies of China’s environmental politics. Judith Shapiro’s *Mao’s War against Nature* [147] and Elizabeth Economy’s *The River Runs Black* [35] are two recent seminar works that further define the field with rich narratives and comprehensive theorization of the political explanations for environmental degradation in China, in the Cultural Revolution and the Reform eras respectively.

In the survey compiled for this article, the sheer number of political science journal articles on the topic increased steadily in the 1990s, and surged after the 2000s. The three leading journals covering politics in contemporary China, the *China Journal*, the *China Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Contemporary China*, had published, respectively, 1, 24, and 12 articles related to environmental issues by 2008.¹ In 2006, two social science journals with a strong focus on environment—

¹ The statistics do not include articles that deal with environmental politics exclusively in Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Environmental Politics 15 (2) and *Development and Change* 37 (1)—devoted a special issue on China.

In terms of scope, the early literature most frequently covered forestry, water (both pollution and conservation), desertification, biodiversity, urban air pollution, and rural land use. The field has expanded greatly since the mid-1990s, ranging from industrial pollution, environmental health, waste land, dam construction, green business, to compliance with international environmental treaties [6, 8, 46, 54–57, 64, 162, 173]. Research is quickly emerging even on the newest issues such as environmental security, organic agriculture, genetically modified food, biotechnology and environmentally friendly technology, energy efficiency, electronic waste, food safety, and climate change (e.g., [1, 9, 21, 43, 49, 50, 68, 82, 126, 142, 144, 145, 152, 155, 157–159, 160, 175]).

In Chinese academia, it is evident that research interest in environmental politics is growing, moving beyond introductory work to more systematic conceptual clarification and theory building [245, 264, 265, 279–281, 299]. A noticeably large number of articles and translated books are on environmental political theory, rarely isolated, but in two particular contexts. One is in relation to neo-Marxist, socialist, and leftist liberal theories with which most contemporary Chinese academicians in political studies are well-versed (e.g., [255, 259, 266, 275, 282, 297]). The other, which perhaps is more worth mentioning, is in relation to the ongoing political transition in China and learning lessons from the “green revolutions” in the West, former Soviet Union and East-Central European Communist countries (e.g., [242, 250, 251, 253, 254, 256–258, 268, 269, 274, 296]). Such a strong presence of interest in environment-oriented political ideas and theoretical reflections on environmental movements in other countries partially reflect the tradition of emphasizing theory instead of empirical studies in social sciences in China. It is also arguably the case that environmental political thought provides a potential niche for Chinese scholars to introduce new thinking about political matters with less concern about sensitivity, for example, equity, autonomy, citizenship, freedom, and even democracy ([71, 210, 242, 252, 262, 267, 276]).

Many of the empirical studies reviewed by this article are written in the format of commentary, reflection essay, single case study, or policy recommendation. Evidently, two topics stand out: environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and public participation. (e.g., [200–202, 204, 206, 208, 211, 212, 214–216, 226]). This pattern of empirical studies of environmental politics echoes, to a degree, the observation above as Chinese scholars find environmental protection a suitable field to elaborate concepts such as public participation, democratic decision-making mechanisms, and community self-governance. Addressing these political terms in the context of environmental protection seems to be a relatively comfortable zone for scholars to insert their implicit policy criticisms along with their optimistic suggestions.

The intellectual dialogue between English and Chinese authors, judging from the texts alone, is mostly one-dimensional from the former to the later. Unsurprisingly, Chinese social scientists are reading and absorbing what is published in English-language journals, and many of them apply existing concepts and theoretical frameworks to write up their own empirical studies. Both the Shangdong University Press and the Shanghai Translation Publishing House have completed series of

translations of seminar works on environmental politics in the West, including authors such as Murry Bookchin, Daniel Coleman, and Herman Daly [267, 285, 295, 300]. It is very rare to come across English translations of Chinese scholarship on eco-political theories or detailed discussions of research findings that are first published in Chinese. However, this general trend does not mean non-Chinese scholars ignore their Chinese peers' thinking and observations. Instead, the numerous footnotes, interview lists, and acknowledgements attached to the publications provide evidence that the information and ideas often flow two ways during the process of research and writing. The book *Environmental law and policy in the People's Republic of China* is an excellent example. [139] The two authors spent enormous amounts of time reading through Chinese official newspapers and the *Huangjing Bao* (China Environmental News), influential ideological journals such as *Hong Qi* (Red Flag), legal periodicals and academic journals, popular magazines and books to grasp the "actual working" and "policy underpinnings" (Preface). They even included translations of the most influential academic articles and newspaper editorials by Chinese authors at the time before they presented their own interpretations and analysis.

More Chinese scholars now publish in English and their scholarship is indispensable to many ongoing debates and research agendas. Huan Qingzhi, current director of the Center of Environmental Politics at Shangdong University, who can be considered a founding father figure of comparative environmental politics and environmental political theory in China, has published in both English and Chinese on a variety of topics related to environmental politics, not only about China, but also on eco-political theories, European Green Parties and environmental movements in former Soviet Union (e.g., [71, 209, 210, 250–264, 266]). His most recent review article of two books, *Environmental Governance in China* edited by Neil T. Carter and Arthur P. J. Mol and *China Shifts Gears* by Kelly S. Gallagher, did not shy away from the disagreement with the ultra-optimism embedded in environmental modernization theory and the deep belief in economic and technological advancement as prerequisite for sustainable environmental protection. [71] This is an excellent example of direct exchange at the conceptual level between the two groups of scholars. It is also a sign that the general trend of intellectual dialogue in the field is slowly changing.

Three Political Themes

The State and Environmental Governance 国家与环境治理

The first task for political study of China's environment is almost by default to understand and explain how the state has responded to environmental challenges such as the governing structures, regulatory setting, key agencies, policy-making processes, policy implementation, and law enforcement [2, 40, 41, 76, 91, 99, 103, 116, 134–136, 139, 151, 172, 174, 176]. The environmental protection sector in China shares many features with other branches of the state in terms of governing structures and policy-making/implementation processes. To some extent, classic models developed by political scientists to understand the Chinese state, such as the

“fragmented authoritarianism,” can be applied to explain how decisions are made and policies implemented to solve environmental problems. [277, 278] The environmental sector is not exempt from the constraints salient in the Chinese governing system, such as administrative deadlocks caused by the *tiao-kuai* structure and the dual leadership across the state and the party [76, 91, 103, 163], lack of capacity at local levels [10, 22, 52], and poor performance in law enforcement [96, 97, 128, 165]. Like other social welfare sectors, the environmental protection sector faces the “contradictory impact” of officials’ unshakable commitment to economic development for the past 30 years and the challenges from integrating into the global market [34, 37, 48, 51, 72, 75, 144, 193, 209]. However, there are at least two features of governing structures more evident or peculiar to the environmental field.

The first is a higher level of fragmentation in environmental governance than can be expected from existing theories. Only in the narrowest sense does environmental protection mean pollution control alone. In other words, environmental protection is a compound issue area, and it goes beyond pollution control and extends to include at least nature conservation and management of natural resources. It is important to note that, not exclusive to China but for most states, environmental governance in its entirety spreads out across a number of sectors and corresponding institutions. For example, in the United States, besides the Environmental Protection Agency, environment-related federal level agencies include, but are not limited to, the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Geological Survey, Minerals Management Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Affairs. Emerging issues such as climate change, renewable energy, energy efficiency, food safety, and sustainable urban planning are becoming pertinent and integral parts of environmental protection for most governments entering the twenty-first century. These complex environmental issues require multi-sectoral coordination in governance and will stretch environmental governance in China more far-ranging.

Moreover, there is one China-specific explanation for the bureaucratic complications of environmental governing structures. The environmental protection sector of the Chinese state system emerged only recently. During both the Republican era and the first 25 years of the People’s Republic of China, while no designated state agency was established to manage environmental matters, there were state ministries of forestry, fisheries, water, and other authorities over natural resource management. It was not until after the Chinese official delegates returned from the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, did then Premier Zhou Enlai initiate the formal institution building for environmental protection. The environmental sector became a full ministry level entity, the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), only in 1988. Therefore, to establish coherent governing institutions over environmental issues in China often means to take over administrative responsibilities from existing ministries and bestow them to the newly established environmental protection sector. This implies reconfiguring of administrative domains, power, and personnel which is prone for bureaucratic friction. Take the nature conservation area as an example. Nature conservation in China has been traditionally part of the administrative domain of the forestry sector. All national and local offices to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora are embedded in the forestry bureaus instead of the environmental protection bureaus (EPBs). China has over three hundred national-level nature reserves, which

中國的國家環保部門建立時間很晚。因此賦予該部門實際職能的辦法必然需要對其他部門的職能進行分流，而這或許造成官僚系統內部的爭議與矛盾

are governed by several state agencies, including, first and foremost, the National Bureau of Forestry (NBF), and not limited to the National Bureau of Oceanic Affairs, Ministry of Land and Resources, Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, and lastly the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP). Since its separation from the then Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction in 1982, the environmental protection sector has been seen as a winner in several state-level administrative reforms and has expanded its governing power over the issue of nature conservation. After the 2007 “Super Ministry Reform” (*dabuzhi gaige*), MEP will be responsible for biodiversity management and national ecological protection reserves, which was formerly the job of the forestry administration.² Bureaucratic tension, in addition to classic *tiao-kuai* structure, or central-local relations, causes further fragmentation in the governance of nature conservation in particular, and environmental protection in general.

The second feature of environmental governance in China is a higher level of openness to international experiences. Since its inception, China’s central decision-making body over environmental issues has taken lessons from other countries. Participation in the UN Stockholm Conference was a direct impetus for China to set up domestic leadership over environmental protection. In 1992, the State Council established the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, a high-level advisory body created “to further strengthen cooperation and exchange between China and the international community in the field of environment and development.”³ Such a formal step to seek advice from foreign experts may not seem bold in today’s China, but was unprecedentedly innovative at its time. SEPA was a first state ministry to have a regular channel for international expertise input. The first training program designed for central-level officials funded by a foreign NGO was hosted by SEPA.⁴ Researchers have also found that the environmental sector is more open for international organizations’ policy advocacy [199], more accustomed to establishing joint projects and semiofficial agencies with international funding [187], and more willing to adopt international norms in regulating emerging issues such as biotechnology ([82]).

It would be too simplistic to argue that bureaucratic conflict of interest and international influence can fully explain the characteristics of environmental governance in China. However, these two factors are crucial and in many ways and are the source of other distinctive features of China’s environmental politics, as discussed in the following sections.

Public Awareness, Social Activism, and Bottom-Up Environmental Politics

Another important theme for the studies of China’s environmental politics moves away from the state and looks into the society and socio-cultural factors, such as public environmental awareness, environmental activism, and public participation in environmental policy implementation. This is the area that the field has contributed

² “Ministry will give more weight to green issues,” *China Daily*, 13 March 2008.

³ Official statement at <http://www.cciccd.org>. Accessed 10 March 2009.

⁴ The LEAD (Leadership for Environment and Development) program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in the early 1990s.

most to China studies. In addition, this is where research conducted by Chinese scholars has increased rapidly and seemed to be pushing the boundary of academic writing in China. Some have published on the most recent anti-dam construction movements in Yunnan, which could seem to be too controversial to appear in Chinese academic journals not long ago (e.g., [219]).

As accurately summarized by Melanie Manion, “Survey research on Chinese politics is still a fairly young enterprise” and “national representative surveys remain fairly rare” ([221]: 755, 758). Yet, the environmental field is an exception here. Surveys of public environmental awareness at national, local and sectoral levels have been conducted by various teams including state affiliated research institutions, private consulting teams, Chinese local NGOs, and independent scholars. More importantly, these surveys have been made available for the public and the academic community. According to Yok-Shiu Lee ([89]: 38–39), between 1990 and 2002, at least 28 surveys on public environmental awareness were conducted in China, four of which are nationwide. The Center for Contemporary China Studies at the Peking University conducted two surveys, “National Public Environmental Awareness Survey” and “Survey of Local Officials’ Environmental Awareness in Nine Cities,” and published the findings in 2002 [229]. The China Environmental Awareness Program released a nationwide survey in 2007, and will continue with a follow-up report in 2009.⁵ The diverse nature of and convenient access to the existing survey data and the feasibility of conducting independent surveys are beneficial for researchers in the field to capture the patterns of environmental awareness in China. In addition, researchers also found specific patterns of environmental awareness among key or targeted populations. For example, consistently mixed findings were evident in environmental bureaucrats, and awareness by university students was surprisingly low [166, 183, 185].

When examining the societal side of environmental politics in China, one topic that attracted scholarly attention from early on is **the citizen complaint system as a formal institutional channel for public participation in enforcement of environmental regulations** [13, 27, 165, 172, 178]. 公民投诉机制 With further institutional reform taking place within the environmental protection sector, new participatory mechanisms have been experimented with and adopted, for example, the public hearing component of the Environmental Impact Assessment Law, regulations related to public dissemination of environmental information. Such reforms have opened new space for citizens to use legal action to pursue pollution compensation and are anticipated to bring out more significant changes in near future [198, 217].

Few would dispute that one of the most exciting changes in China’s political landscape in the recent decade is **the rapid emergence of nongovernmental, voluntary, autonomous citizen associations and activism groups**. The momentum of this wave of social activism and self-mobilization is so impressive that some have even labeled it as “associational revolution” [293]. **The environmental sector is both the forerunner and the most fully developed in this wave of change**. It has seen a wide spectrum of different forms of citizens’ collective actions, ranging from spontaneous protests by victims of pollution, to organized public campaigns targeting particular governmental or business construction projects.

⁵ Official website <http://www.chinaceap.org>. Accessed 10 March 2009.

A large amount of literature has thus been written to map and analyze environmental NGOs, their various origins, organizational characteristics, and development trajectories [12, 26, 61, 84, 100, 146, 189, 200, 202, 205–207, 215, 216, 220]. In fact, besides the studies of public intellectuals, political dissidents, and protests by rural farmers and urban workers, environmental NGOs and activism have become among the most frequent empirical cases used by authors across social science disciplines when applying the concept of civil society to examine state-society relations in China [101, 141, 161, 164, 244, 283, 298].

Though there is consensus that the scope of the environmental NGO community is growing fast in China, scholars disagree on the political interpretation of them as a whole in terms of both their autonomy from state penetration and the nature of their interaction with the state. On the one hand, some argue that grassroots environmentalism in China is fragmented and highly localized, and therefore unable to mobilize enduring demonstrations to oppose governmental policies [101, 200]. Peter Ho pointed out that because the Chinese government had become greener, “environmentalism was also robbed of the opportunity and urgency to openly confront the Chinese government” [61]. C. W. Lo and S. W. Leung’s research [95] on environmental politics in Guangzhou arrived at similar conclusions. They argued that the regime’s lack of a democratic tradition imposes tremendous institutional constraints for nongovernmental groups to organize fragmented public opinion into a powerful political force. Jiang Ru’s dissertation research explicated well the ironic relationship between the Chinese state and semiofficial environmental organizations: while the state has been able to use traditional administrative means to continue its monitoring of those organizations, those quasi-governmental organizations managed to bypass regulatory redress and obtain some level of autonomy in achieving their own goals [140]. In the edited volume *China’s Embedded Activism*, Peter Ho and Richard Edmonds continue to hold reservations about how fundamental the transformation Chinese NGOs have brought to the Chinese politics. They perceive the environmental activism as “resourcefully adapted to, rather than opposed to, the political conditions of its era” ([65]: 331–334).

On the other hand, some observe that Chinese environmental NGOs and activists are delicately dealing with political constraints, and in fact have been able to achieve their goals, maintain their autonomy, and convince the government of their intentions through non-contentious means. Tony Saich summarizes this type of micropolitics as “negotiating with the state,” and Jennifer Turner calls it “pushing the envelope” [141, 168]. Guobin Yang points that the use of nonconfrontational methods is “a strategic choice” for Chinese environmental NGOs at a fledgling stage of growth ([189]: 55). Erpin Li’s “needle therapy” analogy is a perceptive note on how NGOs have exerted their impact in the maze of environmental policy implementation. Using the 2006 national environmental NGO survey data published by the All China Environmental Federation, Xufeng Zhu [241] was able to present statistical evidence for the relevance of NGO development to regional disparity in environmental governance in China. The essential question for these authors is not whether environmental NGOs should or should not take contentious actions, but whether they are able to achieve their own goals by persuading local authorities to change attitudes and policies.

Despite unsettled disagreements, studies of NGOs, public complaints, and other forms of bottom-up politics in environmental protection have made significant contributions to one of the core debates in contemporary China studies—**whether a civil society is emerging in China** and, if so, **whether there is evidence that we can apply the concepts generated from the experiences in the West to understand it**. Since the end of the 1980s, many China experts, including historians, sociologists, and political scientists, have been enthusiastic in applying the concept of civil society to push forward the argument that fundamental changes of Chinese politics should not be found within the state system but the society. They have tried the framework of civil society on a variety of social forces, especially public intellectuals, dissident movements, community based associations, and even private sector and business associations [243, 249, 270, 284, 286, 288, 289–291, 294]. However, findings were quite uncertain and mixed. Environmental NGOs and social activism, on the contrary, present the most dynamic, illustrative, and promising evidence to *substantiate* rather than simply repeat the argument of civil society.

Environmental Diplomacy and International Relations

The third focus of the studies of environmental politics in China explores external factors, covering topics such as China's environmental diplomacy, participation in and compliance with international regimes, role to take in regional/transnational environmental politic, and transnational/international sources for domestic environmental governance. Thomas Robinson's edited volume [133] was a first effort to outline the nexus between China's domestic environmental problems and policy responses, and its foreign relations and international commitments. Elizabeth Economy's scholarship [31–33] on the examination of China's first two decades of environmental diplomacy (particularly in climate change), and the gradual changes in Chinese officials' perceptions of environmental matters was a milestone. Haibin Zhang's authoritative works have opened and laid foundation for environmental studies in China's international relations field [230–236].

There is no doubt that China leaves an unparalleled and increasing footprint on the world's environment due to the scale of its population, territory, and biodiversity compounded with its miraculous economic development in the past 30 years [94]. In addition, there is evidence that China's domestic policies of nature conservation, logging, and fishery and dam construction have caused significant stress on the environment of its bordering countries and regions [11, 38, 69, 73, 86, 88, 119, 177, 179, 195]. Some of these spillover problems have led to visible local societal resistance and intergovernmental tension. For example, collective action and protesting facilitated by both nonstate advocacy groups and intergovernmental channels have emerged, in countries that are downstream of the Mekong River, against dam building and water resource extracting in the upstream areas inside China [30, 54, 110, 123].

Against this background, China's domestic environmental governance and its international relations were arguably interconnected from the beginning and continue to be even more so [17, 20]. On the one hand, the world has gradually recognized the importance of China's participation in global environmental governance building and acceptance of international norms [124, 197]. There has been a high level of

multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental interest in reforming the environmental protection sector in China [23, 43, 73, 118, 119, 171].

On the other hand, China has been more active in international environmental affairs and made commitments to change its domestic practices [19, 137, 138, 194, 196]. To date, China has signed over 50 international environmental treaties; in some cases, such as that of genetically modified food, the government has introduced corresponding regulations to meet with international standards [44]. Participation in international environmental negotiations and signing of environmental agreements have in turn modified domestic institutional settings for related policy-making and policy-makers' perceptions [78, 81]. Hongyuan Yu's research demonstrates how new coordination mechanisms were established among various bureaucratic agencies following China's participation in international negotiations and what Chinese officials have learned through these negotiations [191, 192].

Moreover, China is no less accomplished in expanding its official bilateral commitment to environmental cooperation. Japan was the earliest donor and continues to be one of the most active partners in this respect [58, 127]. As part of the agreements achieved between then presidents Clinton and Jiang in October 1997, the U.S. and China have since maintained formal dialogue, project-based cooperation, and other forms of bilateral exchanges in climate change, energy efficiency, water management, and many other environmental protection issue areas [45]. A distinctive feature of U.S.-China bilateral environmental cooperation is that American NGOs have been involved from the very beginning and entrusted to innovate and to broaden possible arenas for collaboration (Baldinger and Turner [5, 43, 171]). European governments have also been interested in assisting China in environmental protection, particularly through expertise exchanges and policy advising. Less research can be found to explain the differences among Japan, the U.S., and EU member states in terms of bilateral environmental assistance to China. More recently, China has reassessed its own international assistance programs, and there is evidence that environmental cooperation has been explored as an option to improve bilateral relations with fellow developing countries, particularly in Africa [203].

Environmental protection is among the issue areas for which significant evidence has been found that nonstate civic actors, largely transnational environmental NGOs, emerge as a main force to bring about changes in policy and practice [246, 248, 272, 273, 287]. Researchers of China's environmental politics have paid sufficient attention to this pattern and made painstaking efforts to identify the main transnational nonstate actors involved in environmental protection in China, and examine whether they are indeed different from conventional external actors in the mode of policy advocacy [85, 92, 117, 199, 223]. The *China Environment Series* provides an inventory of American and international NGOs and research institutions that have ongoing projects in environmental protection and energy in China. Little was expected by international relations scholars that transnational advocacy networks would emerge in China persuaded by the case of Three Gorges Dam [26, 83]. However, Fengshi Wu [188] has found evidence that the linkages and solidarity among local Chinese and international NGOs in nature conservation have grown steadily in the past two decades. Both the openness of China's environmental governance and development of green NGO community, as discussed previously, contribute to this rise of transnational activism and policy advocacy.

Though international relations studies related to China have been dominated by issue topics such as security and political economy (e.g., trade, foreign direct investment), recent research on China's environmental diplomacy in general, and participation in international negotiation of global warming and climate change in particular, has caught increasing mainstream attention. In his latest book, *Social States*, a brilliant summary of his long-time investigation of international socialization of the Chinese state, Alastair Iain Johnston [271] includes the findings from the environmental field. The literature on transnational nonstate actors in China's environmental protection introduced some of the most important new theoretical developments in the international relations field to China studies.

Conclusions

The article owes its readers a justification note on the importance of environmental politics to politics in general. If the time had been around the publication date of Karl Wittfogel's book, *Oriental Despotism* [182], this note would have been less onerous. For according to conventional wisdom at that time, it was imperative to understand a country's natural dispositions before attempting any kind of deep political analysis.

Times change, as seems the way of research. However, the thoughtful notes provided by Andrew Mertha in the preface of his book *China's Water Warriors* ([111]: xiv) reminds us that the politics of water and natural resources has never been out of fashion in China studies. Mertha points out that water politics reveals how the Chinese state operates, based not only on his own research but also that of his distinguished mentors: Michael Oksenberg, who wrote a doctoral thesis on irrigation during the period of Great Leap Forward; Kenneth Lieberthal, who chose dams and hydropower as one of the three cases in the seminar work, *Policy Making in China*; and, David Lampton, whose work on water policy provided the foundation to the groundbreaking edited volume *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China*.

Scholarly contribution of environmental politics to China studies in general is not limited to empirical findings. In each of the three dimensions, namely, the state and environmental governance, public awareness and environmental social activism, and international cooperation in environmental protection, there are representative pieces of literature that have closely engaged with the core debates in the China field, providing critical evidence and introducing new conceptual frameworks. The field of environmental politics is relatively new, so are the issue topics it covers and calls attentions. In the context of China, environmental political research is on the frontline of identifying emerging locale and modes of social contention and institutional innovation. By investigating and explaining how new practices and norms are established in the environmental sector, many of the authors reviewed in this articles have grasped some of the most potential changes in Chinese politics, such as the rise of NGOs and the development of transnational activism. These findings are not merely meant for better environmental protection policy-making but more to promote better understanding of the political transformation taking place gradually yet profoundly in today's China.

國家與環境治理
公共意識與環境
行動主義
環境保護的國際
合作

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