

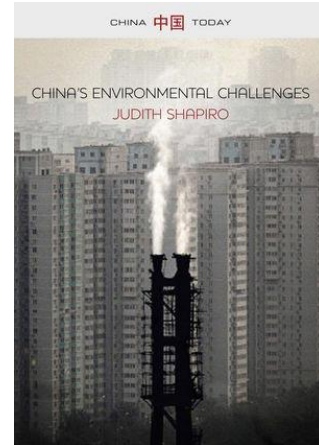
Judith Shapiro, **China's Environmental Challenges**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012, 205 pp., \$22.95 (paperback), \$14.99 (Kindle).

Reviewed by

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Over the past decades, China has paid a heavy price in the form of serious environmental deterioration for its unprecedented yet unsustainable economic development. Judith Shapiro's book **China's Environmental Challenges** analyzes the environmental problems facing China using perspectives from public administration, political science, sociology, economics, and international relations, among other disciplines. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Shapiro provides readers interested in communication research with many insights. The book is organized around five key concepts: *globalization*, *governance*, *national identity*, *civil society*, and *environmental justice*. Aside from chapter 1 (an introduction) and chapter 7 (prospects for the future), each chapter focuses on one of the five core concepts.



Globalization is considered a major driver of environmental challenges facing China. During the process of globalization, China has been integrated with the rest of the world through cultural and economic ties. On the one hand, the author argues that consumerism as a global culture encourages people to lead affluent lives characterized by resource extraction and consumption. The rising middle class in China embracing consumerism has led to resource shortage, even exhaustion. On the other hand, the author points out that China's huge demand for resources is driven by the global market. In the global economic system, China functions as a major manufacturer by extracting domestic resources or importing raw materials from underdeveloped regions and by exporting end products to developed countries. This happens as pollutants from the manufacturing process contribute to environmental degradation such as polluted land, water, and air.

Governance is discussed in terms of what the government can or cannot do to address environmental issues. Particularly noteworthy is the new term "state-led environmentalism," which is proposed to describe the response to environmental challenges from a top-down perspective. Considering that China remains an authoritarian country, the central government is held accountable for solving environmental problems. However, state-led environmentalism is often less than efficient because "competing and overlapping bureaucracies plague every level of administration, and the lines of authority from the 'center' in Beijing to the localities are often weak" (p. 59).

National identity is treated as a historical force that prevents China's sustainable development. National identity is developed from self-understood history, including "interpretations of where a given people stand at the present moment, as well as future dreams, goals, and ambitions for the destiny of the nation" (p. 79). The author uses the term "superiority-inferiority complex" to describe the dynamics of China's national identity, indicating that Chinese people are simultaneously proud that the nation had

prominent status in the world in ancient times while ashamed of the humiliations at the hands of foreign powers from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Such a complicated and paradoxical national identity has become a driving force behind China's rapid economic development, through which China tries to regain its prominence by becoming an economically powerful country. However, the obsession for enormous economic growth regardless of the cost has seriously endangered the sustainability of the environment.

Civil society is treated as a bottom-up mechanism to address environmental issues. Specifically, citizen activists and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are considered two major actors in public participation. Given that ICTs are changing the way in which activists communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate (Garrett, 2006), the development and popularization of ICTs have technologically empowered individuals to take on an increasingly important role in environmental activism. In recent years, an emerging group of activists consisting of educated urban residents is participating in well-organized demonstrations to protect their rights through strategic use of ICTs. For instance, Xiamen residents' demonstration against the building of a paraxylene (PX) chemical plant in 2007 is used as a typical example to explicate the role of text messaging in initiating and organizing the demonstration.

In addition to individual activists, citizen group/organization is an important force in environmental advocacy. There are three types of registered NGOs in China, namely, domestic NGOs (e.g., Friend of Nature, Global Village-Beijing, etc.), government organized NGOs (GONGOs) (e.g., China Environmental Protection Foundation, Beijing Environmental and Development Institute at Renmin University, etc.), and international NGOs (e.g., Greenpeace-China, World-Wide Fund for Nature, etc.). The author further summarizes several strategies used by NGOs in environmental advocacies in China in recent years: (1) celebrity endorsement, that is, using celebrity to influence and shape public opinions and behaviors; (2) alliance building, that is, establishing a bilateral relationship with investigative journalists or editors to realize the "news-making value of environmental issue" (Yang, 2005, p. 56); (3) accountability politics, that is, holding the government or corporations accountable to public commitments, such as those made in press releases or corporate mission statements or at summit conferences, and so on; and (4) information dissemination, that is, gathering and disseminating convincing research results via credible media channels to the general public. Particularly, the functioning of NGOs in China depends on a complicated and nuanced relationship with the government in that the authorities are not always tolerant of challenges from competing forces.

Environmental justice deals with the uneven distribution of environmental harms and benefits among different regions of China, as well as between China and other parts of the world. The author analyzes the failure to realize environmental justice at three levels. Locally, environmental injustice occurs between the city and slum areas outside of the city, or between cities and rural areas, such as controversies on the selection of landfill sites. Regionally, environmental injustice happens between the wealthy eastern coastal areas and the less developed western regions in China. Internationally, environmental injustice is manifested twofold. On the one hand, China is a victim by importing hazardous materials, such as electronic wastes from developed countries. On the other hand, China also exports its waste to less developed countries and extracts resources from underdeveloped regions such as Africa. Although environmental justice cannot be achieved immediately, it can be gradually attained through

environmental negotiation and diplomacy to arrive at a desirable outcome in multilateral relationships (Susskind & Ali, 2014).

In general, the book not only offers comprehensive and rich description of the cause of and response to environmental degradation in China, but also inspires readers to reflect on the issues at stake from the viewpoints of their own research field. In terms of communication studies, the book invites researchers to inquire further into the role of ICTs in environmental activism, ENGOs' strategic communication in environmental advocacy, and the link between environmental diplomacy and international relations.

It is believed that a thorough and convincing investigation into the environmental challenges facing China is of great significance to the world, because "the choices the Chinese Communist Party, national government, and Chinese people are making influence not only the health and well-being of China but the very future of the planet" (pp. 1-2).

References

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