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"Breathing Air with Heft: An Experiential Report on Environmental Law and Public Health in China"

Ryan, Erin

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This article explores the gritty intersections of daily life and environmental law in modern China, an industrial powerhouse still struggling to reconcile economic opportunity with breathable air, clean water, healthy food, and safe products. With comparative perspective on analogous challenges in the United States, it reports on these critical domestic challenges for China at a pivotal moment in its reemergence as a dominant world power. China's continued geopolitical rise may well hinge on its ability to respond successfully to the environmental causes of growing social unrest.

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The article synthesizes these insights with unfolding regulatory efforts into a full exposition of the environmental challenges that preoccupy modern China. Drawing from the rich reservoir of ordinary life infuses the research here with writing that is as experiential as it is academic—not just the legal particulars of monitoring fine particulate air pollution, but also how life changes when you are physically immersed in those particulates day after day. It chronicles the experiences of living within China's increasingly polluted environment—without clean air, potable water, or faith that the products we encountered in the marketplace would not make us sick. It reflects on the ways that established environmental problems can foster newer ones, such as the paradoxical implications of poor water quality for the mounting waste management crisis. Yet it also describes environmental realms in which China regularly puts the United States to shame—such as its widespread investment in urban public transportation systems, its fuller-scale embrace of renewable energy, and the Chinese people's less resource-intensive lifestyles.

After this descriptive account, the article explores fundamental differences in American and Chinese environmental philosophy and evaluates the unique challenges each nation faces in moving toward sustainable governance. Finally, it balances my observations with parallel reflections from a Chinese lawyer about the environmental issues she encountered while living in

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the United States. Her observations remind us that while Americans can take pride in the innovations of environmental governance we once pioneered, we must also contend with ongoing legal and cultural hurdles to environmental protection and public health, including mounting indifference. I conclude with thoughts about what each nation can learn from the other, and the hope that sharing experiences like these will help bridge the cultural gaps we inevitably encounter in working together to resolve global environmental challenges.

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