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‘Getting Rich Is Glorious’: Environmental Values in the People’s Republic of China

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ABSTRACT

Pollution and overuse of resources in China have profound implications for the Chinese people and the world. Globalisation may be partly to blame for this situation, but it is hardly the only explanation. China has been overusing its resources for centuries. Traditional values appear to offer environmentally benign guidance for China’s economic development, but they are largely impotent in the face of now-pervasive values manifested in Western-style consumption. Government policies go some way toward addressing this problem, but what may be required is a new set of values that brings self-interest and environmental protection into common cause.

KEYWORDS

China, environment, consumption, globalisation, values

The forces of globalisation are competing with and overwhelming environmental values in the developing world. Nowhere is this more evident and damaging than in China. China’s economic development, and the growth of a middle class seeking and living the Western way of life, is having devastating impacts on its environment. Increasingly this is affecting the global environment, notably through China’s growing demand for imported natural resources and its emissions of greenhouse gases. Given the size of its population and the scale and speed of its economic growth, protecting the global environment will be impossible as long as environmentally destructive trends continue in China. But globalisation is not solely, or necessarily mostly, to blame. Despite underlying Eastern values that

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sometimes encourage living in harmony with nature, China has a longstanding record of environmental destruction and resource over-exploitation. Arguably, traditional values are partly to blame. Regardless, invoking environmental values – both Eastern and Western – will not be enough to avert the ongoing environmental crisis and coming ecological disaster in China. Convincing the Chinese to limit their adverse impact on their own and the global environments may require 'capitalising' on their widespread, strong desire to consume and achieve economic prosperity.

Environmental values are seldom divorced from other values. While we can philosophise and contemplate the wonders and beauty of the natural environment per se, nature almost always suffers when there is conflict between it and other values. The most obvious compromise is made between environmental values – environmental appreciation and preservation – and economic and lifestyle values. Many people may want to live in harmony with nature, but almost nobody does. Having said this, in economically developed countries there are now longstanding, if grossly inadequate, efforts on the part of governments, nongovernmental organisations and some citizens to create more environmentally sustainable societies. In contrast, most of the developing world is going in the other direction: toward compromise of ecological systems to make way for the wider and deeper adoption of Western consumerist lifestyles. We see this manifested most profoundly in China.

There is a very large body of literature on the nature and scale of environmental destruction in China, including its implications for the world (see Smil 1993 and World Bank 1997). Pollution and resource depletion are spreading across China on a vast scale. In the Chinese government's own annual environmental report, many environmental problems are highlighted: acid rain on one-third of the land, including 60 percent of the 274 cities analysed; water pollution, with serious pollution in one-half of all rivers; severe water shortages, especially in the north; widespread hazardous wastes, including imports thereof; pervasive coastal pollution and over fishing; and over grazing and desertification, the latter occurring at the rate of two million hectares per year – to name only a few of the more obvious problems (AP 2002, p. 6). The story of China is not a new one. It is a story of the juxtaposition of ecology and care for the environment with capitalism and consumerism that has been experienced in the West. The world is in trouble if China's large and increasingly affluent population adopts anything like American or even European lifestyles. But that is precisely what is happening on a grand scale.

In China, the Western experience is exacerbated by an instrumental view of the environment that is nearly devoid of what we might call Western environmentalism. This is not to say that the Chinese are necessarily any more environmentally rapacious than are, say, Americans or Australians. We cannot discount the massive harm done to the Earth's environment by the developed countries. To be sure, per capita pollution and consumption is much lower in

China than in the developed countries. But the anthropocentric view 'which holds that absolutely everything exists for the sake of humanity', and which Robin Attfield (1999, p. 27) calls (rightly, in my view) 'ridiculous' is, I think, the prevailing view of the environment almost everywhere. This is the sort of environmental values pervasive in China, with even the instrumental, anthropocentric connection to environmental protection and sustainable development that is taking hold in much of the West often restricted to some of China's leadership and not yet widespread at the grassroots.

The Chinese anthropocentric perspective is evidenced by the government's interpretations of 'sustainable development', which tend toward 'sustained' economic growth, albeit with increasing environmental considerations.[1] It is also demonstrated by China's international diplomacy on the environment, which continually insists that economic development must be paramount (see Economy 1998; Harris 2002, 2003; Kobayashi forthcoming). But this is not surprising, given that commonly accepted definitions of sustainable development, notably that of the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987), which has served as the basis for much environmental diplomacy since the 1980s, explicitly connect environmental protection with economic development (if not always economic growth, the preferred Chinese reading of the term). The environment is valued for its instrumental role in protecting and promoting human interests; in the international interpretation it does not have value per se. This describes Chinese environmental values.

Ancient Chinese philosophy is sometimes promoted as a potential source of inspiration and guidance for new, more environmentally sensitive ways of thinking about the environment that could be helpful globally. However, while traditional Chinese values may have some good messages for the West and the world, China itself is not a place to find much inspiration. Other anti-environmental values, many of them exacerbated by the globalisation of capitalism and consumerism, now have overwhelming force in China. Increasingly this will adversely impact the global environment. Indeed, Smil argues, 'No decisive progress toward a globally sustainable civilisation can be achieved without a gradual transformation of the Chinese environment and society. This is not impossible – but will be exceedingly challenging' (Smil 1996, p. 175). Therefore, ways must be found to mitigate environmental harm in China. Paradoxically, this may require turning to some Western economic values often blamed for that harm.

In this essay I describe some environmental conditions in China and point to their profound implications for the entire world. I look at traditional environmental values in China as a backdrop to a discussion of contemporary values, which are actually very bad for the environment. I also discuss the role of globalisation, although I do not blame it for China's problems, and I suggest that environmental values are largely impotent in the face of economic values manifested by Western-style consumerism. I look at environmental policy in China before suggesting a possible way of moving out of this profound conundrum.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN CHINA

If you care about nature and the global environment, you should care about what is happening in China, where the scale of environmental destruction and the consumption of natural resources and living things is monumental. The scale of destruction is new, but pollution and resource exploitation are not. Mirroring the Western experience, China has a less than exemplary history of environmental stewardship. Deforestation and human-induced soil erosion and desertification have been ongoing for hundreds of years. Almost all of China's original forests were cleared more than two hundred years ago, with the resulting deforestation of highlands being one of the main causes of the great historical floods for which China is famous (Ponting 1991, p. 74). Once covering three-quarters of China, by the early 1800s many areas had no forests whatsoever, and by the early 1900s only about five percent of China was forested (most of that in steep, mountainous areas) (Ponting 1991, p. 255). Traditional agriculture was less harmful to the environment than are modern forms, but the large population translated into widespread overuse of natural resources. With industrialisation following the communist revolution in the twentieth century, combined with preparations for national defence during the cold war (see Shapiro 2001), environmental damage and resource exploitation increased.

This pattern has been extended and vastly intensified since economic reforms that began a quarter century ago. Economic activity and environmentally harmful industrialisation has expanded rapidly in China, traditional agricultural practices that were (often, but not always) less environmentally damaging have given way to modern methods dependent on synthetic fertilisers and chemicals, automobile use is burgeoning, industrial pollution is widespread, and tens of millions of people are entering the middle classes and adopting Western, consumption-oriented lifestyles. China is using more and more energy (most of it from fossil fuels) and its demand for other natural resources is skyrocketing. As a consequence, historic destruction has been multiplied, and recent examples of environmental destruction and overexploitation of resources are numerous.

Wang (2002, p. 186) has summarised environmental problems in China: Most rivers and the groundwater supplying most cities are polluted as a consequence of human, agricultural and industrial effluents. At the same time, overuse of water and shortages mean that in many areas there is not enough for agriculture. Sulphur dioxide emissions are very high, acid rain covers at least one-third of the country, and air pollution is endemic to almost all Chinese cities. Burgeoning quantities of solid waste are polluting aquifers near landfills. Soil erosion, deforestation and loss of grasslands are growing worse, resulting in drought-blighted agricultural areas and annual floods along several major rivers. According to a government estimate, over one-quarter of China has become 'desertlike', with the proportion increasing each year (Li 1999). According to

Oksenberg and Economy (1998, p. 354), environmental protection efforts in China are being overwhelmed by economic growth, with more people having more money leading to new demand for environmentally harmful products. Even some policies of the Chinese government that at first appear to be good for the environment in fact may not be. For example, some environmentalists avoid criticising China's often-coercive one-child policy because fewer people should mean less pollution, but they have failed to comprehend that many of the resulting 'little emperors' (and empresses), especially in urban areas, are becoming pampered consumers with attendant adverse environmental consequences (see Zhao 1997, pp. 49–50). In a word, 'The Chinese are buying, building and consuming as if there were no tomorrow' (*New York Times*, 2 January 1994, quoted in Smith 1997, p. 5).

The world will suffer the consequences of environmental harm done in China (see Hertsgaard 1997). As Zhao (1997, p. 56) points out, 'dangerous for the long run is the serious damage done to an already degraded natural environment by the single-minded pursuit of economic growth and rising consumption levels in the present era. China's sheer size in area and population makes the crisis potentially catastrophic. To even moderately raise the living standard of 1.2 billion people means tremendous additional demands on food, water, space, energy and other natural resources.' Smith (1997, p. 15) asks: 'if just one billion of the world's 5.5 billion people [in the developed countries] already consume close to 80 per cent of global production, what will be the effect of adding *another* billion consumers – almost doubling the number of people who consume like Americans at present?' China is already the second largest source of greenhouse gases, and its 'furious industrialisation, powered largely by huge reserves of coal, is fast propelling China toward the dubious distinction of the world's Number One polluter' (specifically of greenhouse gases causing global warming and climate change) (Smith 1997, p. 17).[2] It is questionable whether the global environment can cope with the additional stresses coming from China, but it will be very difficult – arguably impossible in the near and medium terms – to make the necessary changes in Chinese values and resulting behaviour.

VALUING THE ENVIRONMENT IN CHINA

Human behaviour everywhere is in large measure a product of individual and collective value. There is competition between environmental values and economic and consumption values. Environmental values are clearly losing in the face of overwhelming pressures. In China, globalising Western consumption values are conspiring with a pragmatic and instrumental view of nature, leading to massive environmental harm.

Chinese Environmental Values in Past

Studies of Asian and Chinese philosophical traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism often see them as being instructive for developing more pro-environmental values everywhere (Callicott and Ames 1989, pp. 67–149; Ip 1983; Tao 2002; Weiming 2001; Yu 2000). For example, ancient Chinese (Taoist) philosophy – 'conventional wisdom, known and quoted by everyone in China' – argues that 'people must respect the wilderness ('Nature' in its 'natural' state), or risk destroying her in well-intentioned efforts to improve upon her' and, when exploiting nature, they 'should try to do so without destroying its regenerative capacity' (Walls 1998, p. 56). Chinese Taoist thought traditionally schooled individuals and society to 'live in a balanced and harmonious way with the natural world' (Ponting 1991, p. 152). Furthermore, some forms of Buddhism are well known for their concern for the environment and especially other species, and Confucianism is often touted for its 'conception of the unity of human and nature' (Li 1998, p. 307).

However, these Asian traditions, even though they tend to highlight the interdependence between humans and nature and may have 'a greater 'affinity' for environmental care' (Peterson 2001, p. 98), may be 'not only powerless against the force of population and industry but perhaps can, like any worldview, be read to justify humans' pursuit of a decidedly unenlightened self-interest' (i.e. one that is environmentally destructive) (Peterson 2001, pp. 96–7). Indeed, Peterson (2001, p. 96) has argued that the attitudes leading to environmental destruction in China come not from Western values but from Asian ones (e.g. Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism). Li (1998, p. 307) believes that Confucianism, despite any non-anthropocentric orientation, has arguably sanctioned environmental destruction. Weller and Boll (1998, p. 482) say it has not led to a bio-centric worldview. Rather, Confucians 'were not, it turns out, particularly interested in oak trees' (Weller and Boll 1998, p. 483).

Regardless of their valuing of the environment, in pre-revolutionary China traditional values were overwhelmed or co-opted by powerful political and economic actors, and were too weak relative to 'pressures of poverty, tyranny, and competition for scarce resources' (Gardner and Stern 1996, p. 79). As Weller and Boll (1998, pp. 495–6) explain it, Chinese traditions,

> which explicitly recognised the interdependence of the human social/political order and the natural world, did not result in the conscious establishment of ecologically sound environmental attitudes, policies, or practices. We believe this happened for at least two reasons. First, the organismic worldviews … were developed to address the dominant concerns of political culture – how to maintain political unity and social harmony – and did not concern themselves with the well-being of nature as such. If anything, they assumed that nature was inherently capable of recovering from human action. Second, the popular practices that emerged from these world views were also put in service of human utility, and

> not infrequently reduced to means for individual and local self-aggrandisement and factional political advantage.

Even if traditional philosophies did lead to environmentalist values in previous centuries, following the communist revolution in 1949 the Chinese government suppressed traditions and 'sacrificed the environment to development' (Gardner and Stern 1996, p. 49). During Mao Zedong's rule in the 1950s and into the 1970s, communist development policies led to widespread pollution and environmental destruction (see Shapiro 2001; Kobayashi forthcoming). According to Kobayashi (forthcoming), environmental problems in today's China are 'embedded in historical precedents that have shaped Chinese attitudes and activities'. Specifically, she points out that 'Maoist views and policies had little regard for the environment', and that Mao considered the natural environment to be a ''common good' that could be made to good use' and 'something to be conquered'. Mao's worldview was so powerful that it remains pervasive, often shaping the way government officials think and leaving a vestige of low public awareness of the environment, especially in the countryside (Kobayashi, forthcoming). Subsequently, even as it improved the well-being of many Chinese, the 'aggressive, Western-oriented modernisation' begun by Deng Xiaoping started a powerful trend toward consumption, energy use and pollution that is growing worse with time (Smil 1996, p. 182).

Chinese Environmental Values in the Present

Today, despite the impression one might get from traditional Chinese artwork, poetry and philosophy, most Chinese seem to have very limited concern for the natural environment beyond its utility for human health or economic prosperity (see Weller and Bol 1998). This is manifested in the horrendous environmental conditions in many parts of China, and by the relatively limited degree (compared to the scale of the problem) to which the environment has figured into development planning (cf. Tseng 1999: 381). This is starting to change, although developmental objectives still overwhelm environmental protection. According to one observer, 'the Chinese attitude toward environmental protection is probably that if pollution is an unavoidable by-product of the struggle for prosperity, so be it. For many, it is better to die a slow death by inhaling polluted air than to die a quicker death through starvation' (Tseng 1999: 390). This sentiment has been extended in many parts of China, particularly the southeast, with fear of death from starvation having been replaced by a strong, sometimes overwhelming, desire for wealth – what one observer has called a 'state-sanctioned fixation on getting rich' (Roy 1998: 142).

A national survey showed that Chinese citizens are more conscious of and concerned about inflation, education, public order, population issues and social morality than they are environmental problems (Lo and Leung 2000, p. 687). In modern China, people tend to 'yearn for air-conditioners, video recorders,

motorcycles, and some even dream of the ultimate status symbols – a private car and a house' (Smith 1997, p. 4). There is low public awareness of the environment, particularly among poorly educated people in rural areas (Qing and Vermeer 1999, p. 145). In contrast, there is greater awareness among the Chinese elite of the need for environmental protection (Ross 1998, p. 59). While the government of China has undertaken major efforts to educate people about environmental problems, ignorance of them remains high, particularly in rural areas, and often government officials work hard to cover up environmental problems (see Kristof 2000).

Walls (1998, p. 60) argues that, despite the environmental values found in tradition, notably in Taoist values, for modern Chinese 'prosperity concerns supersede environmental concerns':

> Having lived through so many decades of life driven by communist ideology, in which the proletariat struggles simultaneously against Nature and against enemies of the working class, most people in China today are more concerned with keeping ahead of inflation than with the very real danger of environmental collapse. For the first time in recent history, they have an opportunity to participate in the actual quadrupling of China's GNP, which means a significant improvement in the lives of most Chinese people – never mind that the quadrupled intensity in exploitation of an already overexploited environment may not be sustainable for many years. The result has been that most Chinese citizens … will be willing to put environmental concerns on the back burner for the time being …

As Smil argues, 'This frenzied rush is the understandable reaction to decades of Maoist deprivation – but it creates a climate inimical to any widespread appreciation of the environmental foundations of economic success' (Smil 1996, p. 184). Consequently, environmental values today are rudimentary responses to the immediate effects of environmental destruction, and 'ruling elites, preoccupied with the preservation of the old political orthodoxy and the corrupt dash for riches, focus on these matters only when it cannot be avoided – in crises such as urban water shortages – or when there is international pressure to confront regional and global environmental problems' (Smil 1996, p. 184).

This is not to say that there are no environmental values in China. Environmental awareness is rising, particularly in urban areas (Woodrow Wilson Centre 1997, pp. 55–6; Oksenberg and Economy 1998, p. 356) and among the elite. Especially in areas suffering from the severest pollution (which include almost all of China's cities), people have demanded changes, and even members of the National People's Congress and other officials have highlighted environmental problems (Lo and Leung 2000, p. 682). According to Ross (1999, p. 299) the increasing 'scope, comprehensiveness, and stringency' of environmental laws in China derive from citizen complaints about local problems, notably noise pollution. More people are being adversely affected by environmental changes, the media is covering more environmental problems, and there is more and more

education about the environment. The resulting environmental values may not be the purest, given that they are generally associated with personal well-being rather than protection of nature per se, but they are important indicators of a trend that might be fostered in the future.

CAPITALISM, FREE TRADE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN CHINA

As in the West, China is experiencing what Lo and Leung (2000, p. 687) have referred to as 'dynamics between economic development and environmental consciousness'. The processes of freer trade and globalisation are key features and drivers of these dynamics. The 'environmental' values spread by globalisation are ones where humankind, particularly its corporate manifestations, is ranked before nature. According to Barkdull and Harris (1998, p. 163),

> Such a ranking justifies an ethic of domination and exploitation, leading to heedless destruction of the natural environment. Prevailing Western thought (increasingly emulated in non-Western societies, with similar results), therefore, justifies human domination, exploitation, and objectification of nature. With no moral worth in its own right, the environment has moral value only in relation to human interests, concerns, and evaluations.

While this ranking and the attendant results existed in China before globalisation had its greatest impact, these are values that are now being embraced in China. Furthermore, one can argue that China's 'consumer and retailing 'revolution' … has only been possible because of keen participation of foreign capital, expecting to make a fortune from the world's largest market' (Zhao 1997, p. 47), with the country's rapid economic growth reflecting 'a triumph of international capital which recognises no national and cultural boundaries' (Zhao 1997, p. 58). The transition to capitalism in China is profoundly manifested in the dire state of the environment there. In Smith's (1997, p. 13) view,

> The forces unleashed by capitalist development – competition, specialisation, production for exchange, economic individualism, privatisation, consumerism – have the effect of worsening many social, economic and environmental conditions for the Chinese even as and indeed largely because this capitalist development is provisioning higher levels of consumption for most, though certainly not all, Chinese. The transition to capitalism is installing an entirely new economic logic – but one that is hardly less brutal or artificial than the communist bureaucratic system it is displacing. … Bureaucratic underproduction, scarcity and shortages are being replaced by a capitalist cornucopia of overproduction, duplication and, already, a superabundance of frivolous consumer junk.

But it is not easy to ascertain the degree to which economic globalisation can be blamed for China's environmental destruction and the paucity of pro-

environment values there. As Peterson (2001, p.95) points out, while 'some observers attribute all environmental failings in Asian nations to corrupting Western influences', deforestation and resulting soil erosion over vast areas of China preceded contact with the Western world (Gardner and Stern 1996, p. 48; Peterson 2001, p. 96). Many people, among them some Chinese, blame Western values for China's environmental problems. For example, one Hong Kong advocate of 'eco-tourism' has implored people to follow Buddhist values of 'compassion, love and care' for the environment, complaining that 'Often we learn Western knowledge, but we don't apply our oldest philosophy… . I feel shame for the people who study Western education and forget the simple thing, the appreciation of living beauty… . How can I teach young kids to appreciate the simple things in their environment if they are being completely globalised by Mickey Mouse? We need to wake up not thinking Coca-Cola. We need to look 20 years ahead and think 1000 years back' (quoted in Tomlinson 2002, p. 16). But this belies a nostalgia for Chinese environmental values that is arguably ephemeral and discounts longstanding environmental destruction before the opening to the West. While globalisation has probably exacerbated Chinese values that are environmentally unaware or adverse, and no doubt has assisted them by providing the incentives and means for even more widespread environmental destruction, it is not all to blame.

Who or what is to blame, apart from human nature? Among the major culprits seem to be a painful history, a government obsessed with economic growth, and the allure of capitalism and the Western lifestyle. Since the late 1970s, the official mantra has been 'getting rich is glorious'. Consequently, a 'quest for economic improvement currently pervades all aspects of Chinese life' (Harris 1996, p. 319). This is hardly surprising given pervasive historic and continuing poverty in China exacerbated by the attractions of modern, Western lifestyles. Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, the messages from the Chinese government and official media to the Chinese people have emphasised individualism, entrepreneurship, and materialism, and young people now crave 'material attractions', having been influenced by 'officially sanctioned hedonism' (Kwong 1994, p. 255). The government slogans of the 1980s 'urged the Chinese to strive for the American way of life – a lifestyle based, above all, on insatiable consumption' (Smith 1997, p. 14). As a consequence, consumerism permeated society at all levels (Kwong 1994, p. 256). Today, Chinese youth's 'individualism, pragmatism and materialism reflect the new philosophies in the advertised official ideology and similar developments in contemporary Chinese society' (Kwong 1994, p. 263), something that is more and more true each day.

Thus it seems that ecological values in China have been subsumed by economic objectives, except when there are immediate and painful consequences of environmental damage. As Smil (1996, p. 184) describes it, China's development over the last two decades has been like that of the United States in the 1890s: 'the country is overwhelmingly preoccupied with growth, expansion, and rapid

embourgeoisement'. The attractions of capitalism, materialism and the modern (i.e. American or Western) way of life are almost all powerful. Consumerism has been 'irresistible to the hitherto materially deprived. As a para-belief system, it has firmly entrenched itself in the void left by the bankruptcy of official Marxism-Leninism-Maoism in the new era of ideological disenchantment' (Zhao 1997, p. 46). Environment therefore becomes important only when it affects economic growth and wealth generation. Smith argues that this 'capitalist barbarism' is 'systematically and inexorably driving China toward social and environmental disaster' (Smith 1997, p. 35): 'By turning over the economy to capitalists [and Western corporations], what gets developed is simply what is profitable, with no concern for society or the environment' (Smith 1997, p. 29). In this conception, values in China are at least partly a consequence of ideas from the West. From the Chinese perspective, however, the forces of globalisation are not the problem; instead, they are seen as saviours for China's ills (e.g. starvation and poverty).

But, as suggested previously, prevailing values are also a consequence of conscious government actions to shape them. While on one hand government officials increasingly realise the importance of environmental protection, they have chosen to prioritise short-term economic growth over the environment. Reform of the economic system, while bringing material benefits, has not coped with the attendant environmental harm. Jahiel (1997, p. 81) asserts, 'the ethos of the reforms and the political economy constructed to support reform goals are antithetical to solving China's environmental problems'. Tseng (1999, p. 390) says that the Chinese government, using this reasoning, 'often ignores some of its environmental policies and regulations and does what it thinks is necessary for economic advancement'. Even where regulations exist to benefit the environment, they can be skirted by local governments more interested in economic growth (Jahiel 1998, p. 757). In short, reflecting prevailing values, wealth creation trumps environmental protection in China – and this remains the dominant official preference despite movements toward sustainable development.

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN CHINA

The Chinese government recognised some environmental problems and began addressing them as early as the 1950s, but into the 1970s it argued that socialist China did not have any environmental problems. However, in view of the increasingly obvious damage to the natural environment in China, and (importantly) its adverse impacts on economic development, by the 1980s the government began to show serious concern. In 1982 the Chinese Constitution was rewritten, with the government pledging to 'protect the environment and natural resources by controlling pollution and its societal impact, ensure the sensible use of natural

resources, and safeguard rare animals and plants' (Tseng 1999, p. 383). The following year environmental preservation was declared one of China's basic national policies, and by the end of the decade China had started its first major national campaign to combat environmental pollution (Tseng 1999, p. 383). Also during the 1980s the government instituted new environmental protection laws in the areas of solid waste, noise, air and water pollution. In 1989 the government strengthened the national Environmental Protection Law, which describes implementation and enforcement measures, rules of accountability and responsibility, and remedies for non-compliance, and China's criminal law was amended to enforce it (UNEP 1999, pp. 241–2). However, while the government implemented a host of laws dealing with all manner of environmental and natural resource issues, their effect was negligible.

By the mid 1990s the government was getting more serious about environmental issues, even closing some polluting factories, perhaps in part a result of the 1992 UN Earth Summit. One of the most notable actions was adoption and promulgation of China's 'Agenda 21' on population, environment and development in 1994. The coverage of China's Agenda 21 is wide, including guidelines on legislation, policies, education, agriculture, environment, energy, transportation, regional development, population, and health. The main themes of this agenda focus first on the need for economic development, although there is also a new concern about protecting the environment for sustainable development. The growing environmental awareness at the national level evidenced by the Chinese Agenda 21 was further demonstrated by pronouncements of national leaders. For example, in 1995 then Premier Li Peng told the Eighth National People's Congress (NPC) to follow the national policies of family planning and environmental protection, and in 1997 President Jiang Zemin reported to the 15th Chinese Communist Party National Congress that pressures on the environment caused by overpopulation and economic development were harming the country (Tseng 1999, p. 383). Furthermore, the national agency tasked with promoting environmental protection was elevated to ministerial status at the Ninth NPC and re-titled the State Environmental Protection Administration (see Wang and Liu 1998). By the late 1990s the central government was allocating substantial (albeit grossly inadequate) funds to environmental and resource protection.

The Chinese government is reported to have shut down tens of thousands of polluting enterprises and has implemented fees for polluting emissions and mandated clean-energy technologies (UNEP 1999, p. 246). Having said this, the environmental benefits of these actions may have been quite limited, and generally environmental laws have been subservient to the interests of powerful individuals and interests (JEC 2000, p. 102). Domestic implementation of environmental laws is hindered by lack of money, corruption at all levels, refusal of local authorities to take laws seriously, and the inability or unwillingness of higher officials to force them to do so, the latter often tied to lack of funds and corruption. The central government often has limited control over the vast

Chinese bureaucracy, particularly outside Beijing. The institutional structure of China's environmental management system is extraordinarily complex, ranging from the NPC and State Council at the central level to environmental protection personnel of townships and neighbourhoods, and environmental protection units of small enterprises and villages (see Wang and Liu 1998, p. 377). China has nearly 3000 environmental protection bureaus (encompassing 8,400 departments) and over 2000 environmental monitoring stations, with nearly 100,000 people employed directly in environmental protection (UNEP 1999, p. 236). In short, China's environmental problems do not stem from a lack of laws and related agencies. Rather, the laws are often ignored and flouted by officials and industrial actors at all levels of society. Lawlessness in much of rural China does not help. Underlying the inability to do more is the continuing official and popular focus on economic development above all else.

Environmental policy making in China has been largely a top-down process (like most policy, of course). Even if popular 'environmental' values in China were more environmental, it remains that there is little public participation in policy making in China, with 'major environmental policies formulated and decided upon by non-elected bureau officials without public consultation' (Lo and Leung 2000, p. 679; see Ross 1999, p. 297). With some exceptions, environmental policy making has originated with the central leadership, which slowly realised in recent decades that environmental protection would have to be part of development planning. Most environmental campaigns and media coverage is organised by the Communist Party and the government (Mao 1997, p. 248). But the policies of the central government are often contradictory or half-hearted. While the leadership acknowledges the scale of the environmental problems facing China, it also tends to lay blame for pollution on the developed countries, and has resisted attempts by other countries or international organisations to set pollution limits. According to Smith, 'China's leaders seem to think that they – and the rest of developing world – have the right to develop and to pollute with the same profligacy as the advanced industrialised nations have done – and damn the consequences' (Smith 1997, p. 27).

Public participation in environmental protection is growing slowly. But China lacks experience with civil society, let alone democracy. There are no independent and powerful environmental organisations; with a few recent exceptions, the government restricts nongovernmental organisations out of fear that they will challenge its authority and subvert political stability (Lo and Leung 2000, pp. 682, 701). What is more, there is little respect for public opinion among government officials, although they have trouble ignoring protests that have arisen as a consequence of pollution and environmental problems that harm public health (e.g. air, water and noise pollution) (Zhou 1999, p. 38). This means that environmentalists within government have few consistent allies among the population. As Lo and Leung (2000, p. 679) point out, 'popular demands for a cleaner environment are not particularly strong since citizens environ-

mental awareness is still on the whole at an early stage. In such a situation it is difficult for environmental agencies to gain any powerful extra-bureaucratic allies to counter strong bureaucratic resistance to environmental protection'. Consequently, at present and for the near future at least, the extent to which environmental policies are advanced and implemented 'depends very much on how much importance government leaders attach to it, and much less on the legal framework, the coherence of related politics and public participation' (Mao 1997, p. 252).

China's leaders have been 'pushing consumerism to distract China's mutinous masses from political issues' (Smith 1997, p. 32). It is crucial for them to sustain economic growth and bring prosperity to the masses in order to avert social – and hence political – unrest that might undermine their hold on power. Many observers, such as Smith (1997, pp. 35–41), argue for greater democracy is an important avenue for slowing the environmental disaster underway in China. Perhaps paradoxically, given that popular environmental values are poorly developed and instrumentally oriented, more democracy is not automatically a good thing for China's environment. Given the new Chinese penchant to consume, and the anti-environmental values prevalent in China, increasing democratic control in China would have to be done very carefully. Simply having more democracy without clear environmental protections in place might make things worse.

ECONOMIC SELF-INTEREST AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN CHINA

Given that environmental awareness and concern among the Chinese public are usually low, that raising them substantially probably depends on the foresight of the government to reflect it in policy and propaganda, and that even the more enlightened government policies are often grossly inadequate in the face of the overwhelming forces of capitalism and the desire for wealth, what can be done? Part of the answer to environmental destruction is going to be willingness in the developed world to provide additional aid to China for truly sustainable development, and to condition all aid and foreign investment to ensure that it is not unnecessarily harmful to the environment (see Harris 2001). This will have to be done in a way the 'capitalises' on the current pro-consumption and pro-growth values in China. However, while it is reasonable to demand that the rich countries aid China with funding and the latest environmental technologies, it is also important for the government to divert more resources of its own away from corrupt officials and environmentally harmful industries. Government spending on environmental protection has increased sharply over the last decade, but it is about one-fourth the amount that even its own experts say is needed just to reverse ongoing destruction (Smith 1997, p. 26).[4] Hence,

the developed countries ought to give the Chinese government what it has been demanding – more financial aid. But that aid ought to be conditioned on better use of existing funds and environmental conditions on new funds.

It seems obvious to recommend that everything possible be done to raise environmental awareness in China and to foster a greater appreciation for nature insofar as possible. It might also be very helpful to promote nascent, post-industrial environmental values that are taking hold in some Western countries, and it might be helpful to educate the Chinese about the aspects of their traditional culture and philosophy that could serve as better models than the consumption values disseminated via globalisation. However, more education, while welcome and probably essential, is not the answer. In Harris's words, 'Westerners are naïve to believe that education alone will save species currently under threat' (Harris 1996, p. 318). 'Post-materialist' values (see Inglehart 1990) and environmentalism may spread beyond tiny cohorts as China becomes more developed, but we cannot wait – especially given that harm to the global environment continues apace in the Western world where such values are supposed to be well entrenched.

Therefore, environmental values in China connected directly to economic prosperity may be the only viable option in the near term. This could come from a wider recognition among Chinese that there is a heavy price to pay for environmental destruction. Individuals suffer the ill effects of pollution and resource scarcities, especially in the long term. There is also a great cost to China's economy. By the late 1990s, air and water pollution alone caused economic losses equivalent to eight percent of China's GNP (Wang 2002, p. 187). That is, the very justification for destroying and neglecting the environment – economic development is more important – is being threatened by pollution and overuse of resources. Perhaps part of the solution to China's environmentally destructive values and behaviour is to bring 'utilitarian capitalism' together with environmental protection.[5] Weller and Boll (1998, p. 496), drawing on their analysis and knowledge of traditional Chinese values, conclude that 'efforts to establish environmental policies will only work if they appeal to the profit and welfare of those charged with affecting them – from officials to factory managers to farmers. Abstract appeals to the well being of "nature" are not likely to work. Successful appeals are likely to speak most to local or individual benefit.' Ross (1988, p. 60) argues that 'exhortation and environmental ethics' have been tried and failed to avert the environmental crisis in China, and that policies appealing to personal self-interest will be more effective. The Chinese should be aided, more than at present, in making the connections between environmental protection and care for the environment, on one hand, and human health and wealth – their self-interest – on the other.[6]

One prescription is to continue ongoing efforts to implement international environmental regimes, such as those agreed at the 'Earth summits' in Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg. Building on this, there should be much more promotion of the most pro-environmental Western values (not the pro-consump-

tion ones that have been pushed, or at least disseminated, so far). This leads to a very 'un-politically correct' conclusion: maybe we need more globalisation of Western environmental values – at least those that are most advanced toward environmentally sustainable development (e.g. those in some of the northern European countries). However, while we 'look forward' to disseminate the newest Western environmental values in China, it would also be important to look (very far) back to traditional Chinese values that have been altered (and corrupted, at least environmentally) by history. By combining the best of the West and the best of China's traditions, an effective prescription for moving toward new *Chinese* environmental values may be found.

CONCLUSION

In China, forces of economic globalisation are exacerbating environmental destruction. But globalisation is certainly not all to blame for China's environmental problems. Traditional anthropocentric and instrumental values have conspired with capitalism and attractions of Western lifestyles against the environment. In contrast to those who argue (no doubt rightly to a great degree) that some part of Chinese anti-environment/pro-free-market development values have been imported from abroad (as communism was), one can also argue that the slow but accelerating environmental awareness, particularly among educated and urban citizens, is largely 'due to the reform and opening up – particularly to the outside world' (Qing and Vermeer 1999, p. 160). Worryingly perhaps, promoting pro-environmental values – or at least behaviour – may involve some collusion with other, less obviously pro-environment, values that people hold dear, including some of the globalising values that are arguably to blame for where we and the Chinese find ourselves today. Part of the solution to this problem may be found in shifting environmental and economic values in a new direction. This would involve connecting demands for economic prosperity with environmental protection. Without new incentives that are more focused on reshaping short-term interests, things will continue as they are now. Thus there is a need for more international aid, but with environmental conditions attached, as well as more mixing of the best of Western and Chinese values to create new ways of thinking that are appropriate to human nature and the environmental crisis. The best start toward this latter goal would be for people in the West to set a better example by being more environmentally aware and acting accordingly, and for Western multinational corporations and the media they control to promote sustainable lifestyles and associated products in China.

It is important to conceive environmental values that can be effectively disseminated to everyone, including people in China and the entire developing world. Wherever we look for new values, it does little good to argue for those that will not affect people and their behaviour. The best values may be found

in whole or in part in traditional ways of thinking, but this is not a certainty. What seems to follow from what I have said is that reconceived environmental values may not be quite as 'environmental' as purists would hope. Human self-interest probably has to be worked into environmental values. This need not necessarily mean that there must be a 'balance' between human interests and those of nature (those who advocate a 'balanced' approach are too often those who want to delay or weaken environmental regulations). But it does mean that people need to be persuaded that they have a stake in protecting the environment. To argue that environmental values may have to be human-centred and ought to appeal to people's selfish instincts in general simply describes the present reality. What we need, of course, is a new set of values that shifts the burden in favour of the environment.

A final word: One signature characteristic of the Chinese and their government (as in much of the world) is an utter distaste for criticism from abroad, particularly from the West. Hence, two things are important for what I have said. I suspect that most Chinese will reject many of my criticisms (which, I repeat, also apply to Western countries and peoples). Additionally, any efforts to infuse China with the more enlightened new environmental values of the West, as well as efforts by outsiders to shape Chinese environmental policy, must be done in a way that involves the Chinese themselves, is subtle, and respects national sentiments. How to reconcile this essential approach with the need to condition aid and consciously try to reshape environmental values in China is a difficult question indeed.

NOTES

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[1] This mirrors the ambiguity of 'sustainable' in Mandarin Chinese. The term 'sustainable development' is commonly translated as *chixu fazhan*, with *chixu* normally interpreted as 'sustained' (Sanders 2000, p. 63).

[2] It is important to point out that China's per capita emissions will likely remain well below those of Americans and other Westerners. Thus, while the harm they do to the global environment will likely be massive and severe, each (average) person in China arguably bears much less moral responsibility for this harm than does each (average) American or

other Westerner (see Harris 2001 and 2003 for an elaboration on this theme).

[3] I expand on this discussion of Chinese environmental policy in Harris (forthcoming).

[4] Smil (1997) has argued that the economic costs of environmental changes in China are about one order of magnitude greater than all spending on environmental protection.

[5] Harris (1996) has argued that the Chinese utilitarian view of nature can be consistent with wildlife conservation if incentives are institutionalised for long-term benefits instead of short-term profit.

[6] Smith (1997, p. 36) warns against using market incentives to clean up the environment, arguing that they do little to improve the environmental record of industrial production.

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