China: A Foreword

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Since the death of Mao in 1976, China's relaxation of Maoist dogmatism, its explosive economic growth, and its integration into the world community have fostered significant and obvious changes in values at all levels of society, including the state. The Communist Party's increased ideological flexibility has permitted the reemergence of some traditional values, such as filial piety, respect for scholarship, and appreciation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols. At the same time, however, the market, the state, and the international community are introducing powerful new values, some of which are in conflict with traditional values, Maoist values, and one another.

China is still recovering from thirty years of intensive government control over thought and behavior. During the Mao years, it was dangerous to hold or express any value or opinion that deviated from official slogans touting the primacy of class struggle, the "eat bitterness" spirit (or, willingness to suffer in the name of state goals), and "serving the people" (which all too often meant serving local officials). A misspoken word or careless deed could lead to criticism, ostracism, or exile; placing a cushion on a hard chair could be construed as counterrevolutionary; and listening to foreign broadcasts like Voice of America or the BBC could mean death. The state determined values, communicated them through propaganda and meetings in which everyone had to "express an attitude" (*biaotai*), and rewarded those who acted in most strident accordance with these exhortations. Because public values sometimes shifted without warning (as after the 1971 Lin Biao incident, when Mao's chosen successor, Lin Biao, a military man, was suddenly labeled a traitor, and the fashion for all things military ended overnight), people became adept at sensing the political winds and adjusting their statements and behavior to match. They grew mute about their values as a matter of survival. Indeed, there was such a profound split between people's internal experience and their public statements that some now say they no longer knew their own thoughts and feelings or how to speak the truth.

While those years are now more than a quarter of a century past, China is still experiencing the "crisis of values" that they left in their wake. Remarkably, the traditional Confucian emphasis on family ties and advancement through educational achievement quickly reappeared after Mao died, as people rekindled ties with relatives sent into exile or political disgrace, and the young vied for precious spots in universities. But the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution produced such profound

disillusionment with public goals and exhortations that China's older intellectuals sometimes complain that the country has lost its ethical compass. Individualism, materialism, ambition, and faddish superstitions dominate the national ethos. Meanwhile, government efforts to use the old propaganda apparatus of media, billboards, and institutional meetings to influence people's values and behavior, even for the best of purposes, tend to be met with skepticism. In this context, China's environmental leaders have a singularly difficult task.

China's leaders, like those of many other countries, have experienced a major awakening to the importance of environmental issues during recent decades, beginning even before Mao's death with the country's participation in the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. Their awareness of environmental issues intensified with the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, when China signed several major international treaties and adopted Agenda 21's blueprint for action on environmental issues. During these and other international meetings, Chinese officials were exposed to world scientific knowledge and concern about growing environmental problems, and they engaged actively in writing the protocols and treaties that the conferences produced. At the same time, they began linking with international environmental organizations and donor institutions that were seeking permission to conduct projects in China, which gave them a hint of the intensity of the world's interest in China's ongoing loss of biodiversity, its carbon emissions, and its use of ozone-depleting substances. Meanwhile, they were learning from their mistakes, as great floods, intense pollution, blinding sandstorms, and other environmental problems forced China to reevaluate its development path. National pride, a sense of global responsibility, and the wish to leverage environmental issues to achieve other foreign policy goals have all contributed to the central government's strong commitment to environmental protection.

During the 1980s and 1990s China developed a large body of environmental laws, and in 1998, the central government elevated the National Environmental Protection Agency to a ministry-level state administration, renaming it the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). However, the post-Mao decentralization of power to the provinces and the emphasis on economic growth at the local level create enormous challenges for those charged with implementing national environmental policies. Moreover, SEPA's ability to oversee implementation is limited by its tiny national-level staff of 270 (compared with 6,000 staff at the U.S. EPA headquarters in Washington).

China's opening toward environmentalism has also been complicated by its turn away from ideological Maoism toward "Market Leninism" and its integration into the global economy, which have brought economic growth beyond the coping capacities of China's environmental protection apparatus. China's adoption of market principles has allowed it to break its "iron rice bowl" commitments to provide lifetime employment and social welfare, while promoting a get-rich-quick mentality that hinders enforcement of environmental regulations. State-run enterprises, with their promises of lifetime safety nets, are shutting and collapsing, leaving millions of unskilled older workers without a livelihood and creating tension between the public

goods of social stability and environmental protection. Uncertainty over the stability of land leasing policies, especially in the years immediately following the 1978–1979 "responsibility system" reforms, whereby households contracted with the state to farm assigned lands, led households quickly to exploit their natural resources out of fear they would soon be taken away.

Other recent developments, however, have supported China's nascent environmentalism. Self-reliance in grain has been a goal for China during much of its history, and grain supply has been a perennial source of anxiety owing to the country's large population, its vulnerability to floods and drought, and its long periods of international isolation. But China's integration into the global economy has permitted the country to feel secure about its food supply for the first time in memory. This in turn has allowed policy makers to rethink their emphasis on aggressive land reclamation for agricultural development, while advances in science and technology have allowed farmers to use less land for similar output. Moreover, devastating floods in 1998 and 1999 sparked much Chinese scientific analysis of the role of logging, erosion, dikes, and wetlands in-filling in promoting floods, leading the government toward a new appreciation of the environmental services provided by forests and wetlands. China's culture of pragmatism helps promote the understanding that conservation and restoration are means of hedging against similar future risks. Thus, "wastelands" have been redefined as wetlands, to be respected as "the kidneys of the planet," and logging has been banned in the upper reaches of China's great rivers. In some regions, land reclamation for agriculture has been replaced by wilderness restoration. Moreover, China's popularity as a tourist destination has shown some local people the possibilities of ecotourism as a new source of revenue, and hence allowed them to see their way toward supporting nature preservation.

Meanwhile, China's opening to the outside world has brought intellectual ferment and exposure to environmental writings. The openness is remarkable, considering that a mere quarter century ago contact with outside ideas was still politically risky, and it was considered dangerously bourgeois to read any but a handful of approved writers. Since then, China has published the environmental classics *Silent Spring, Our Common Future, A Sand County Almanac, Only One Earth,* and many other writings on environmental challenges, the global interconnections among environmental issues, and the urgency of rethinking development paradigms. Another source of energy for contemporary environmentalism lies in Chinese philosophical traditions, which emphasize principles of sustainability and reverence for nature.

These ideas and the wish, particularly among educated young people, to reach out to the world community, coupled with revulsion and sadness at China's heavy pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and other environmental harms, have fueled a small but significant environmental movement. Participants include mature intellectuals, college students, independent activists, government think-tank scholars, and foreign donors and partners. Chinese universities are introducing environmental studies into the general curriculum, and basic environmental education is being brought even into elementary schools.

Despite the intense environmental commitment of certain sectors of the Chinese population, institutionalized avenues for activism remain limited. Chinese nongovernmental organizations remain tightly controlled, and they tend to restrict their activities to those that do not threaten the government, such as afforestation, volunteer trash pickup, endangered species protection, and environmental education. Student environmental clubs are administered under the aegis of the Communist Youth League, limiting their potential for independent action. And the level of activism varies greatly by region, with some areas of the country, such as the Southwest, teeming with environmental groups and others, such as those described in this chapter, remaining relatively quiescent at the grassroots level, perhaps because of their remoteness from institutions of higher education. Despite these limitations, the great passion for environmental issues in certain sectors of educated Chinese society provides an important counterpoint to the dominant ethos of consumption and wealth-acquisition, and could be an important source of support for the Chinese government's goals were the Party to relax its fear of the institutions of civil society.

A key mechanism that remains available to the government to communicate values related to environmental protection is China's centralized propaganda apparatus. Media broadcasts of foreign and domestic nature shows have become everyday fare throughout China. News stories about environmental problems and successes are common, and environmental accidents are covered more frequently than in the past. While billboards sending messages about picking up trash may have little effectiveness, news coverage of international Earth Day and other such events, as well as opportunities for public participation in their Chinese versions, provide occasions for the transmission of environmental values in a social context. Finally, public protests about environmental harms such as high local cancer rates or highly polluting factories, and legal actions and protests calling for the redress of such harms, are on the rise, contributing to increased public awareness of the importance of environmental issues not only on a global scale but also on a personal one.

Meanwhile, however, other values that tend to contribute to China's environmental problems resound more loudly still: globalization and economic development, and their coverage in the media, send messages about material success, status symbols, short-term pleasure, automobile ownership, and the Western model of development, energy use, and consumption. In contemporary China, after decades of ideologically enforced abnegation, materialistic calculations often dominate people's thinking to the exclusion of other social values and goals. Naturally, at a time when the developed world has taken few steps to reduce its own overconsumption, most Chinese are skeptical about arguments that the developed world's model should be off-limits to them because the planet's environmental health depends on their taking another path. Moreover, much of China remains poor. In some regions and strata, people are even worse off than they were during the Mao years because of the withdrawal of social safety nets like guaranteed jobs, pensions, and government-provided health care. For broad swaths of the population, survival is the only value that matters.

Under the economic reforms, power has devolved from the center, with the result that local conditions vary greatly, and individual bureaucrats can make an enormous difference in determining whether environmental goals are emphasized in their region. It is thus extremely difficult to generalize about the status of environmental values in China. Even where there are no indigenous environmental movements, environmental concerns may come to the forefront; moreover, China's long-standing penchant for developing models for emulation, whether at the level of the individual person, the town, or the entire region, has meant that some parts of the country have been publicized as ideals for the rest of China to copy.

China's central government now understands that environmental sustainability should be integrated into the country's economic development. There are numerous motivations for environmental policy action, for environmentalism is linked to flood protection, restoration of falling water tables, national energy security, public health, diplomatic leverage, and national prestige. Chinese leaders' pragmatism has even led them to consider the economic costs of China's environmental behavior, and to begin to implement a "green GDP" that would give the country a better picture of the real costs of development. Beijing's challenge is to persuade local officials that these priorities are important, and success in this area varies.

The cases described in the coming pages show that the promise of grassroots organizations and public support for the protection of China's environment has yet to be fully realized. In the case studies of the polluted city of Benxi and the Sanjiang Nature Reserve, local officials have made an effort to clean up and to protect, and in this sense the case studies are partial success stories. However, resources and staff for significant central support remain limited, and endemic corruption contributes to a general feeling among the local populations that they are being asked unfairly to make sacrifices from which elites are exempt. Moreover, weakening safety nets and increasing economic insecurity make it difficult to persuade ordinary people of the merits of environmental action, and local young people have yet to organize themselves into a force for the promulgation of environmental values. The question remains, then, whether China's central government can succeed in transmitting environmental values to the myriad sectors and parties whose activities affect the environmental health of China, especially in the face of so many other conflicting social messages.