

Book review: Yifei Li, Judith Shapiro: China Goes Green - Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet

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Book Reviews

YIFEI LI / JUDITH SHAPIRO, *China Goes Green: Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. 240 pages, 1 map, £15.99. ISBN 978-1-5095-4312-0 (pb)

China's role in addressing environmental challenges is widely reported and speculated upon. This is not only because China's participation is essential to effectively address global environmental problems, but also because China seems to be observing a green rhetoric and regulatory shift. The rise of China and its arrival in the environmental realm have prompted both hope and caution. Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro have engaged in this discussion by investigating the mechanisms of China's approach to environmental protection, which they have termed "state-led authoritarian environmentalism" (p. 20). Drawing on their own experiences and knowledge of scholarly and policy literature, the authors have examined the unstated agendas behind China's environmental protection slogans – and have investigated the real consequences of state-led activities in the name of environmental protection. They have found that political and strategic considerations often ride over environmental protection agendas, which has produced mixed results for the environment and society.

In the main body of the book, Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro provide a comprehensive analysis of the concrete mechanisms and tools of Chinese state-led coercive environmentalism domestically and internationally, on the planet and in outer space. In chapters 1 and 2, Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro begin with investigations of campaigns, target setting and mandatory behaviour modification in the developed east of China, and with one-size-fits-all policymaking, green grabbing and forcible relocation in the less developed western regions and border areas. The authors provide up-to-date empirical evidence to show how the heavy-handed actions led by the state have given rise to even thornier problems. Some methods of state-sponsored environmentalism have benefitted the privileged and harmed the already vulnerable, perpetuating systemic inequality without substantial environmental protection gains.

The authors proceed to delve into China's increasingly assertive actions in the international and outer space arena. In chapter 3, the authors examine the tools and techniques used by the Chinese government to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, such as the win-win framing of green developmentalism, the projection of ecologically friendly soft power and the use of green technocracy in transnational governance. By elaborating how the Chinese state has strategically taken advantage of green discourse in the Belt and Road Initiative, the authors join the discourse on the strategic factors driving the evolution of China's envi-

ronmental and foreign policies. The fourth chapter discusses China's authoritarian tools on the global and planetary stage – including manipulating global trade, engineering the atmosphere for blue skies and rain, utilising outer space environmentalism to gather big data and researching geoengineering to combat climate change – which are closely “linked to strategic and geopolitical agendas” (p. 152). However, the authors also admit that the pace of change is extremely rapid and there is little settled evidence in highly technical sectors.

Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro question whether China's approach can effectively address environmental challenges. They claim that environmental authoritarianism, rather than authoritarian environmentalism, is a more accurate term to describe the Chinese state activities presented in the book. The state is grabbing more and more power in the name of environmental protection, which has led to problematic or even devastating consequences in some cases. The authors thus challenge and deconstruct two assertions: first, that the Chinese state has genuinely gone green; and second, that radical solutions and non-democratic measures are justified to protect the earth.

This book conceptualises China's approach to environmental protection and reveals the coercive face of the state-led activities pursued with this aim. In establishing a platform for further discussion and debate, the volume provides a timely evaluation of the specific practices of Chinese state-led environmentalism and their consequences. The analysis speaks to several on-going discourses, such as the implications of the increasing centralisation of power since Xi Jinping took office, and the overly optimistic expectation for China to save the world from global environmental challenges. An important takeaway is that the effectiveness of Chinese state-led environmentalism lies in mechanisms that hold state power in check and in broad consultation with non-state actors. Without such measures, the resulting policies often advance state consolidation of power and produce mixed records in environmental and social terms.

In their analysis, Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro assume a monolithic state pursuing a coherent strategy for power, with the capacity to enforce its will at its discretion. That assumption merits careful consideration. Scholars who study China have convincingly documented competition and conflicts along the vertical and horizontal lines in the party-state system. Since the Open and Reform policy introduced in 1978, the Chinese state has experienced significant transformation, becoming increasingly fragmented, decentralised and also internationalised. The ways in which the party-state system has transformed and the implications this has for environmental protection deserve more attention. For example, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment has gained more power to advance an environmental agenda and cannot be compared to the weak bureau it was when first established in 1988. And non-state actors such as NGOs have been granted the right to sue polluters under the new Environmental Protection Law.

Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro could also have sharpened their argument by examining alternative explanations. Contradictions between state behaviour and mixed results might emerge out of conflicts between different actors within and outside of the complex party-state system, rather than from the coherent coercion imposed by a single state. This hypothesis is worth testing because the central government does not always have control over local officials to enforce policies fully. The inconsistencies of China's dealings with international environmental issues could also result from conflicts and negotiations between various actors in the government system and international actors.

In summary, this book provides a convincing analysis of the coercive practices of China's state-led environmentalism, with rich empirical evidence. The authors' critical analysis has both practical and theoretical relevance. With a clear structure and accessible language, it provides an excellent overview of China's environmental protection approach.

Dongping Wang

GRAEME SMITH / TERENCE WESLEY-SMITH (EDS), *The China Alternative. Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*. (Pacific Series). Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021. 504 pages, \$70.00 (print). ISBN 978-1-7604-6416-5 (print), 978-1-7604-6417-2 (online). The book is available to download for free at press.anu.edu.au.

The present volume discusses the rising influence of China in the Pacific. Although previously competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition ("chequebook diplomacy") prompted foreign policy initiatives from both Asian countries, over the past ten years the People's Republic of China (PRC) has pulled ahead by a substantial margin. These initiatives have made China the most important trading partner of Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific Island states and thus the second largest trading partner in the region. After Australia, China is the most important donor country in bilateral development cooperation in the Pacific region. This cooperation is being broadened through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which, so far, New Zealand and 10 of 14 sovereign Pacific Island countries in the region have joined. In addition to the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, which switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, these countries are Fiji (diplomatic relations since 1975), Samoa (1976), Papua New Guinea (1976), Vanuatu (1982), the Federated States of Micronesia (1989), Cook Islands (1997), Tonga (1998) and Niue (2007). The Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu number among the 15 mostly small countries which currently still recognise Taiwan.