

China's summons for environmental sociology

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Abstract

From demand for natural resources to sustainability initiatives, everything seems to hinge on China. China's environmental entanglements call out for the analysis and understanding that environmental sociologists practice. Environmental sociologists from within and beyond China have begun to explore how society, polity, and ecology intersect, but we have yet to fully take on the challenges that China's environmental struggles pose. This article focuses on four domains in which China's experience compels us to rethink our theories: environmental ideology, political economy, civil society and environmental justice, and international environmental politics. In each domain, China's institutions, discourses, and place in the world-system reframe major currents of thought in environmental sociology. These points challenge us to decenter environmental sociologists' focus on how things happen within liberal polities in the global North; they likewise push us to reconsider arguments about the South. Together, these challenges present an opportunity to extend our theory and practice, fashioning a more global environmental sociology.

Keywords

China, civil society, environmental justice, environmental sociology, globalization, ideology

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Introduction

Everything seems to hinge on China. Mounting demands for minerals, fuels, and agricultural products are transforming lives and landscapes within the People's Republic of China and beyond. In 2015, China produced about half of the world's steel and close to 60% of the world's cement. That same year, consuming nearly half the world's coal, China produced about 30% of greenhouse gas emissions. China's ballooning – and now apparently plateauing – fossil fuel consumption confounds efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, its leaders' investments in renewable energy and embrace of the Paris Accord have transformed global climate change politics. Across the global South, China's new patterns of development assistance and private investment are challenging the conventional wisdom about green development. Domestically, recurrent contamination events and public health incidents raise questions about how the public responds to hazards and how the state addresses public interests in the absence of binding accountability mechanisms. Ambitious pollution control, conservation, and land rehabilitation programs clash with persisting degradation, poaching, and land taking for forestry and farming.

Each of these situations demands the analysis and understanding that environmental sociologists practice. Furthermore, each challenges environmental sociologists to extend our theoretical and empirical scopes. Among other dimensions, China's authoritarian politics, reciprocity-centered social norms, and distinct position in the global political economy not only present additional evidence for answering environmental sociological questions, but also challenge us to ask them in new ways.¹

Environmental sociologists within and beyond China have begun to explore how society, polity, and ecology intersect in this country. For example, researchers have used survey data to study how Chinese citizens understand and respond to environmental issues (Liu and Leiserowitz, 2009; Xiao and Hong, 2010; Xiao et al., 2013). Others have examined how the Chinese state may be institutionalizing environmental interests in culturally and politically specific ways (Lang, 2002; Mol, 2006; Zhang et al., 2007). A growing body of work on land management and rural livelihoods in China has an environmental sociological flavor, though this work's focus on policy and mechanistic processes leaves room for arriving at more theoretically generative insights (Qin and Flint, 2010). The work of environmental sociology in China is well afoot.

Recognizing this foundation, we argue that environmental sociologists have yet to fully take on the challenges that China's environmental struggles pose. We focus on four domains: environmental ideology; political economy; civil society and environmental justice; and international environmental politics. We discuss how, in each of these areas, China's institutions, discourses, and place in the world-system contribute to dynamics that challenge major currents of thought in environmental sociology. These points challenge us to decenter environmental sociologists' focus on how things happen within liberal polities in the global North; they likewise push us to reconsider arguments about the South. Together, these challenges present an opportunity to extend our theory and practice, fashioning a more global environmental sociology (Lidskog et al., 2015).

Environmental ideology: From Mao's war to ecological civilization

We start with puzzles of environmental ideology. Folk and elite thought growing from centuries of local tradition and cosmopolitan exchange have given Chinese people ample material for constructing and negotiating environmental ideologies. These intellectual resources encompass animist holism, Confucian instrumentality, Buddhist concern for sentient life, Daoist abiding-with-nature, socialist high modernism, global environmentalism, and Chinese nationalism. More and more, people subscribe to 'green' discourses. Middle-class urban residents embrace thrift and vegetarianism and mobilize to reject polluting industries. Entrepreneurs and state authorities invoke eco-development narratives that promise to harmonize the urban and rural in dream-places that integrate steel, concrete, plastic, leaf, and water (Sze, 2015). Tourists seek pristine nature, picturing indigenous groups as ecologically noble savages. Farmers remake their relationships with land and water. Environmental nationalists view responses to climate change as a power struggle with the West (Liu, 2015). Anthropologists, geographers, historians, and political scientists have done appreciable work characterizing these ideologies (Hathaway, 2013; Heggelund, 2004; Swislocki, 2013; Tilt, 2010; Weller, 2006). Environmental sociologists could make vital contributions by examining how people in varied social locations harness available repertoires to assemble environmental views and reconcile behavior and belief.

These strands in society at large are hard to disentangle from state-proffered ideology. Since assuming power in 1949, the party-state governing the People's Republic of China has moved from an ideology of modernist domination of nature (Economy, 2011; Shapiro, 2001) toward a stance that subjects environments to technocratic management aimed at optimizing production of economic value and environmental services (Chen et al., 2017; Yeh, 2009). Nature is no longer an adversary to be defeated but a set of enabling and constraining forces to be managed with prudence. This shift corresponds to broad efforts to shape environmental attitudes and behaviors among China's population. Environmental stewardship has joined the demands of *suzhi*, a term that connotes one's quality as a human being. What it means to be a 'high-quality' Chinese citizen has expanded beyond education, self-presentation, and market-oriented attitudes to encompass environmental attitudes and conduct (Hsu, 2017).

Central authorities have taken these shifts further by putting 'ecological civilization' at the center of official rhetoric. Rooted in discussions that go back three decades, ecological civilization sprung into national prominence when former president Hu Jintao introduced it in a 2007 report (Gare, 2012; Pan, 2016). The term presents a new epoch of human existence, distinct from preceding primitive, agricultural, and industrial civilizations in accomplishing sustainable development through reflection on and active response to the challenges that industrial growth brings. While ecological civilization sometimes appears as a discourse of universal civilizational shift, Chinese Communist Party and state authorities also assert that it embodies a particular pathway made possible and necessary by China's historical situation (Central Committee and State Council, 2015). Official statements pair these assertions with batteries of policy measures ranging from promoting bike-share programs and managing residential water demand to consolidating forest tenure reforms.

Two themes frame these policy objectives. The first is moving beyond preoccupation with economic growth toward prioritizing sustainability, instituting incentives to achieve this, like changes in how officials are evaluated. The second is fostering 'ecological culture' and 'ecological values' through propaganda, education, and the media. State authorities actively, but selectively, urge incorporating historical legacies in contemporary ideology. Neo-Confucian ideas emphasizing the cosmic unity of humans, heaven, and earth are now celebrated as an essential component of Chinese tradition (Tu, 2001; Tucker and Berthrong, 1998). Daoism, less celebratory of the state, receives less enthusiastic endorsement. Meanwhile, of the countless cosmologies of indigenous peoples in China's peripheries, some are instrumentally placed on pedestals as exemplars of harmony with nature, while most languish as development projects erode cultures and languages.

Ecological civilization is of interest to environmental sociologists in at least three ways. First, as an ideological discourse concerning environmental interests and their relationships to economic development, state action, and the public good, its roots, impacts, and implications merit study. Few other governments have brought environmental considerations to such a central place in high-level discourse and policy or tied environmentalism so tightly to nationalist rhetoric. Second, ecological civilization is not only a component of official ideology but a theory of social-environmental change. Insofar as its propositions can be clarified and operationalized, they can be evaluated alongside other theoretical framings. Third, the practices aimed at realizing ecological civilization beckon environmental sociologists to study empirically how the state undertakes efforts to shape citizens' ideologies and practices, the behavior of firms, and the various qualities of environments.

The welter of environmental ideologies in China confronts environmental sociologists with discourses and social relations we have not yet addressed well. This shifting landscape is fraught with tensions: between official and folk, traditionalist and modernist, elite and popular, urban and rural, and nationalist and cosmopolitan. This diversity of ideological resources, their creative intertwinings, and the rapid pace of discursive change, signal a deeply interactive and mutually constitutive relationship among beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, challenging us to deepen our engagement with environmental ideology.

The environmental state and capital

China's political economy eludes prevailing explanations of relations among state, capital, and environment. Environmental sociologists' signature contributions to political economy – the treadmill of production, ecological modernization, and the metabolic rift – each need considerable twisting to account for an authoritarian and nominally socialist one-party state engaging with domestic and global capital to foster growth that is both planned and unruly while making substantial environmental reforms. Chinese authorities' attempts to join sustainability, developmentalism, and stability yield particular dynamics of the environmental state.

Treadmills and rifts

The paradox of continuing degradation and ambitious environmental reform provides ample fodder for treadmill of production and metabolic rift analyses. The processes

generating China's resource-intensive growth and constrained environmental reforms embody the tensions among state, firms, and worker-consumer-citizens central to treadmill theory. Likewise, surging resource degradation as commodity production alienates people from their work and from nature is emblematic of the metabolic rift. The central anomaly concerns the 'socialist' state. Schnaiberg (1980) argued that socialist countries with machinery for mobilizing resources in the public interest would be better equipped than liberal ones to rein in the treadmill. Likewise, metabolic rift theorists foresee socialist revolution as the only solution to capitalist degradation (Foster, 1999; Moore, 2015). Clearly the Chinese state's mode of regulating capital, promoting accumulation and concentrating surplus value, is not what either envisions. Given the ambiguous meaning of socialism in China's context, perhaps the *strength* of the Chinese state, enabling state agencies to allocate resources and manage civil society, is the key issue. The Leninist political system does bestow state officials with the power to act swiftly in the name of the public. Whether these actions effectively improve environmental health or serve a meaningfully public interest is often unclear, while they have a marked tendency to heighten capital accumulation. In many cases, treadmill impacts intensify. Repeated pollution incidents and growing hazards of extraction in domestic peripheries suggest that unchecked political power in the Chinese state further deepens the metabolic rift.

But notable environmental interventions strain claims of unremitting degradation. Bold central policy initiatives accompany practical compromises that hinge on the resource endowments and incentive structures implementing officials face. Take as an example the Returning Farmland to Forest Program (RFFP), in which rural residents received compensation for planting trees on retired farmland. To reconcile environmental goals with farmers' demands and local governments' development imperatives, pulp plantations and fruit and nut groves were redefined as instances of forest rehabilitation, transforming the program's social and environmental significance (Zinda et al., 2017). Such reconfigurations oblige analysts to take care in evaluating policy measures, which are not always what they seem. A policy approach built around selective scaling-up of pilot efforts to achieve centrally defined goals equips state authorities to pragmatically identify promising interventions (Heilmann, 2008). Using these methods, state authorities have set out aggressively to manage environments with bureaucratic techniques as well as market-based instruments.

The Chinese state has been particularly active in instituting market-based mechanisms to address air pollution and energy concerns. In the early 1990s, the central government experimented with emissions trading to curb sulfur dioxide pollution (Zhang et al., 2016), and since 2013, pilot carbon markets have been established to reduce carbon emissions in several locales (Lo, 2015). Drawing on the experience of the RFFP, state authorities have directed programs of payments for environmental services (PES) at forests, grasslands, wetlands, coastal waters, and more (Xu, 2013). However, the Chinese experience of market-based instruments diverges from the models envisioned by economists. Programs of payments for environmental services lack the conditionality, additionality, and meaningfully voluntary participation deemed vital to effective PES practice (Zhang et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Bing Zhang and colleagues (2016) have described emissions markets as 'thin, congested, and unsafe.' Local governments broker transactions, negotiate prices, and abruptly change market rules (Tao and Mah, 2009). The

development of carbon markets has been mainly powered by the state as a national development strategy, rather than the coalition led by business or finance that predominates in the West (Lo, 2015). Regardless, these hybrid state-steered, market-mediated policies strain definitions of 'neoliberal' that sociologists often use to label market-led intervention, challenging us to critically examine and theorize how the states make use of market instruments (Zinda, 2017).

Treadmill and metabolic rift framings, as well as allied critiques of environmental neoliberalism, offer at best partial explanations of the political economy of environments in China. A view of states as 'working on behalf of corporate interests' (Magdoff and Foster, 2011: 64) cannot keep up with the steps of this dance of domination and accumulation, degradation and rehabilitation. One possible response, in line with concerns that theories of environmental political economy paint in too broad strokes (Rudel et al., 2011; Shwom, 2011), would be to piece the dance together by following the moves more closely. Environmental sociologists can draw on scholarship on subnational governance in China to examine how competing interests across government agencies (Jahiel, 1998), shifting incentive structures for officials (Landry, 2012), selective enforcement of market mechanisms (Lo, 2015), and specters of public interest litigation and protest (Lang and Xu, 2013; Stern, 2013) condition state action on environmental concerns. These inquiries might enable environmental sociologists to specify our theories for 'hard authoritarian' (Shambaugh, 2016) contexts and fill in their micro-level implications.

Ecological modernization without deepening democracy

China's emergent environmental reforms give some credence to the claim that China is embarking upon ecological modernization. An environmental logic appears to be taking its place alongside logics of capital accumulation and political domination (Chen et al., 2017). But several processes central to ecological modernization, such as political pluralization and decentralization, are only partially realized (Mol, 2006). Massive investment in green industrial sectors superficially resembles the greening common in ecological modernization accounts, but the driving force comes from the state, not business. Moreover, in pictures of 'strong ecological modernization,' ecological modernization depends on deepening of democracy that makes state and capital responsive to civil society actors with ample space to voice environmental concerns (Christoff, 1996; Eckersley, 2004). While there is mixed evidence for expansion of civil society action around environmental issues, as we discuss below, deliberative institutions remain weak at best. Some observers argue that authorities use ecological modernization discourse instrumentally to extend state control (Ho, 2006; Yeh, 2009). Nonetheless, emergent environmental reforms present a case for positing a variety of ecological modernization.

An authoritarian pathway of ecological modernization poses fundamental questions about environmental governance. Some assert that China's energetic action on economic and environmental policy, contrasting with gridlock and interest group battles in democratic polities, shows that authoritarian regimes may be better equipped to survive wicked problems like climate change (Beeson, 2010; Blühdorn, 2013). Rudel (2013) argues that transformations of the magnitude of addressing climate change have

historically transpired through crisis mobilizations. He suggests that China may present a prototype of a 'sustainable development state' in which government, firms, and civil society mobilize around a national project. Yet rigorous empirical evaluations of these sanguine propositions still await. As one observer admits, the argument for authoritarian environmentalisms remains 'necessarily impressionistic [and] speculative' (Beeson, 2010: 283).

The prospect of green authoritarianism raises ethical questions that have long vexed both sociologists and political philosophers: assuming that individual flourishing and pluralistic recognition are fundamental principles of justice, under what conditions, if any, is it acceptable for elites to pre-empt democratic accountability in the name of a public interest that is not derived from citizens' own expressions of a common good? These concerns are ethical in nature, but they hinge on empirical questions: (1) under what conditions authoritarian regimes might act effectively on urgent environmental concerns that democratic institutions fail to address, and (2) what the social and environmental consequences of the absence of accountability are. Addressing these questions will require us to empirically evaluate how varied expressions of accountability contribute to environmental governance. In China, it would mean examining actual instantiations of the officially endorsed theory of 'consultative democracy' (*xieshang minzhu*), which inheres in broad consultations with people in various social locations under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (Central Committee and State Council, 2013). Given the well-documented risks of complex systems in general and authoritarian governance structures in particular (Freudenburg, 1993; Perrow, 1984), efforts to manage risks and deliver environmental governance in China deserve critical evaluation.

Civil society and prospects for environmental justice

These considerations move us to the realm of practice and the question of environmental civil society. We focus our discussion on environmental justice struggles, which present forcefully the promise of civil society to maintain deliberation and action toward a common good, calling the state to account to realize justice for the marginalized (Eckersley, 2004; Harrison, 2011). Environmental justice scholarship addresses the causes and mechanisms of unequal distribution of environmental harms and amenities as well as the ways people mobilize to demand recognition and redress. China presents distinctive patterns of unequal exposure to hazards, opportunities and constraints for civil society organizations, and difficulties for grassroots mobilization toward environmental justice. Studying environmental justice in China is important in its own right for its tremendous material significance for millions of people subjected to the exhausts of this country's growth machine. Beyond that, given the focus of environmental justice scholarship in liberal polities of the global North, examining China will help equip sociologists to understand struggles for environmental justice in the South.

Exposure

China's social and political terrains generate distinctive patterns of unequal exposure and exclusion. Environmental justice research in the United States focuses appropriately on

how race, class, and related axes of oppression intersect in patterned vulnerability. China's historical legacy and present structures allocate hazards along different lines. Exposures vary regionally, between urban and rural areas and between the coastal economic core and inland peripheries. Recent calls to address rurality as a dimension of environmental justice (Ashwood and MacTavish, 2016; Pellow, 2016) have added moment in China. Much of China's industrialization has taken place in rural areas, concentrating some pollutant emissions in the countryside. At the same time, industrializing agriculture has concentrated fertilizer and pesticide residues as well as livestock manure in rural hinterlands (Schneider, 2017). China's peripheries endure resource extraction, industrial pollution (Lora-Wainwright, 2013), energy projects (Magee, 2006; Tilt, 2014), and conservation-based exclusions (Coggins, 2003; Yeh, 2013). Poor people bear the costs of affluence.

These regional disparities crosscut social distinctions of class and household registration. Factory workers bear the brunt of occupational exposure to industrial contaminants. These wage workers are disproportionately migrants from rural to urban areas, who bear the double burden of working class position and rural housing registration, or *hukou* (Ma, 2010). *Hukou* registers every Chinese citizen with a location of residence and agricultural or non-agricultural status. Historically, non-agricultural status conferred on urban residents entitlements to public goods like guaranteed employment, housing, healthcare, and education, while people with agricultural status were guaranteed access to land. While many of these controls have been moderated (Andreas and Zhan, 2016), *hukou* continues to have powerful effects on life chances. Schoolman and Ma (2012) show that urban areas with large concentrations of migrant workers with agricultural *hukou* are disproportionately likely to be sites of facilities with high emissions of air and water pollution.

Grassroots protest

China's authoritarian mode of governance makes it especially urgent to recognize the subjects of environmental justice struggles: aggrieved and afflicted people who may be denied recognition in a political economy that puts tight limits on collective organizing. Collective protests over pollution, land takings, and facility siting decisions have become a persistent feature of China's landscapes (Lang and Xu, 2013; Steinhardt and Wu, 2015). Rural communities have responded to contamination events with appeals to higher-level state authorities, performing folk religious rituals (Jing, 2009), backchannel activism using private connections with officials (Zhang, 2012), and public protests (Li and Zhao, 2012). Protests draw on symbolic framings rooted in Chinese history. Mobilization draws from distinctive social formations grounded in kinship groups, religious associations, and rural collectives, as well as new technologies and media (Jing, 2003; Steinhardt and Wu, 2015; Tong, 2014). The centrality of informal relationships and folk culture in collective strategies signals potentially fruitful directions for future inquiry.

Difficulties beset people who dare to mobilize. Protest is anathema to governments seeking to maintain social stability. As in labor disputes and land expropriation, state authorities confront environmental protesters with sophisticated techniques for pre-empting, containing, and defusing collective expressions of discontent (Chuang, 2014;

Lee and Zhang, 2013). For example, when residents of fishing villages protested in the wake of an oil spill in Shandong Province, officials, obsessed with social stability and fearing business retaliation, suppressed the protests (Chen and Li, 2014). In some instances, state authorities make concessions to quell unrest, but later quietly reintroduce controversial projects in different locales (Scally, 2017). It is no surprise that a state preoccupied with stability maintenance constricts the space for contentious claims-making.

Channeling organized environmental advocacy

Given these constraints on grassroots contention, activism within institutionalized channels might present a more promising avenue. Since domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) resumed an active presence in the 1980s and 1990s, a diverse array of organizations has taken shape, acting on countless issues across the country. Advocacy organizations have grappled with China's complex conditions for activism with creative strategies including coalition building (Tong, 2009), forming strategic alliances (Zhu, 2013), using new media (Bu, 2015; Wang and Chen, 2013), and public interest litigation (Tong, 2013). NGOs in locales that present differing contexts of funding support and state management take locally adapted strategies (Hsu et al., 2017). Environmental organizations and other policy entrepreneurs may exploit openings in China's political structure to influence environmental policy-making by promoting voluntary standards, articulating new issue framings, and building networks linking scientists, officials, and activists (Mertha, 2009; Teets, 2018). The specific actors, resources, networks, and strategies these policy entrepreneurs engage merit further inquiry.

These successes should not fool us into thinking that organized advocacy has become easy. They are a testament to many people's commitment and ingenuity amid difficult and changing constraints. From the early years of the World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) panda rescue missions (Schaller, 1994) to more recent efforts to establish new protected area models (Zinda, 2012), environmental organizations have continually found themselves under the watchful eyes of the state, if not in the despotic hands of 'tiger' officials (Coggins, 2003). Recent legislation further constrains international NGOs and restricts the ability of domestic organizations to raise funds internationally. Organizations that advocate for marginalized populations face particularly sharp limitations. Recent legal changes have broadened opportunities for NGOs to pursue public interest litigation. However, high costs and narrow criteria for standing make realizing this strategy difficult (McCallum, 2017). Authorities open up spaces for advocacy where they judge that it will serve party-state interests (Hildebrandt and Turner, 2009). Within this space, which currently includes urban greening and controlling pollution incidents, NGOs have appreciable latitude to act. Environmental justice, meanwhile, may not be as promising a cause.

Most accounts of environmental justice struggles center on how actors in civil society call upon firms and states to recognize and redress unequal environmental burdens. However, the lines between state and civil society, state and market in China are particularly blurry. For decades, observers have envisioned a vibrant civil society emerging as a counterweight to the party-state (Saich, 1994; Yang and Calhoun, 2007). The flowering

of environmental activism manifests a broader emergence of spheres of action not entirely controlled by the state. But the autonomy of civil society in China is weak at best. Students of Gramsci will remind us that state agents always strive to penetrate civil society, so state–society boundaries are never clean. Nonetheless, authoritarian China presents a terrain of struggle qualitatively different from what appears in any liberal regime. Much environmental action takes place in the ‘hybrid’ political space of public institutions (*shiye danwei*), civic organizations, industry associations, and scientific research institutions, all of which interlock tightly with the state, whether via internal party cells or overseeing agencies. This organizational space is neither state nor civil society. The evolving constellation of adaptable authoritarian state and constrained civil society necessitates new analytics of environmental justice.

China in international environmental politics

China is the pivot of changing international flows and negotiations. Not long ago, it was tenable to lay responsibility for climate change and waste dumping on elites in the United States and Europe and to mark their hypocrisy as the main obstruction in the way of a just and sustainable future (Roberts and Parks, 2007). China’s economic and political shifts have transformed these arenas (Ciplet et al., 2015). Environmental sociologists must elucidate how China’s rise will challenge prevailing understandings of international environmental politics.

It is no longer accurate to present China as a waste dump of the West. While Chinese citizens still suffer the toxic legacies of production and waste disposal for foreign consumers, China has surpassed the US to become the largest generator of electronic waste (Zeng et al., 2017). More than half of China’s e-waste imports come from other countries in the global South, while most of its e-waste exports go to countries with higher per capita GDP (Lepawsky, 2015). Chinese authorities’ recent announcement of a ban on certain waste imports is clouded by the mining industry’s turn toward e-waste processing (Knapp, 2016) and the urban poor’s economic dependence on salvaged goods trading (Ta, 2017). A view limited to seeing China as first the world’s factory and then its junkyard elides dynamics that complicate conventional pictures of waste flows.

At the same time, the terrain of development is shifting. Chinese firms are competing with US- and Europe-based multinationals to dominate agricultural, extractive, energy, and transport sectors (Oliveira and Schneider, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of infrastructure development and trade expansion is boosting these incursions of Chinese capital in many countries. Chinese state authorities have summoned domestic environmental NGOs to provide assistance in making sustainable trade rules for the BRI and training government officials in target countries to ‘green’ the BRI (MofCom, 2017). This might give these NGOs leverage in influencing state behavior, while also bringing these organizations into international arenas as competitors with The Nature Conservancy, the World Wildlife Fund, and the like. Meanwhile, new financial institutions centered in China, like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, may eclipse the Bretton Woods institutions’ capacity to finance either destructive or progressive infrastructure projects. Environmental sociologists have shed light on the ‘organized hypocrisy’ of institutions based in the West (Goldman, 2005; Shandra et al., 2016). We now face the task of making sense of an emergent world-system configuration.

Chinese elites are seeking a place in international negotiations and rule-making commensurate with China's global prominence. In climate change negotiations, China has gone from pariah to principal (Ciplet et al., 2015: 69). Chinese authorities aim to put China's imprint on global rule regimes, as has already happened, for example, in the trade regime surrounding textiles (Quark, 2013). State agents have worked through the United Nations to pose the ecological civilization drive as a model for other countries to emulate (UNEP, 2016). The Chinese state brings to this endeavor a potent historical narrative that foregrounds abuses at the hands of European and American powers. This narrative underpins a critique of environmental destruction resulting from the imperialism of capitalist developed countries (e.g. Zeng, 2012), resembling theories of ecologically unequal exchange (Jorgenson, 2009; Roberts and Parks, 2009). Nonetheless, China's rising status and its proliferating development projects have ignited social contention in many countries, raising the question of whether China can avoid the quagmires that have bedeviled US and European projects.

These developments pose several questions. How will China's changing mediation of material flows affect global extraction, production, and disposal patterns and their human impacts? Are the social-environmental impacts of projects emanating from China different from those that have come before, and if so, why and how? How will the dynamics of South-South relations and the distinctive organizational practices and political positioning of China-based capital shape how Chinese projects proceed, how counterparts respond, and what happens to people and landscapes? Finally, as China becomes more involved in global rule-making, how will it reshape international norms and practices? Given the polar tendency of discussions of China's excursions, divided between uncritical accounts lauding China's beneficence and stark auguries of a new and even more ruthless force of imperialism (Yan and Sautman, 2013), environmental sociologists have an opportunity and a duty to examine rigorously China's changing role in global environmental change.

Conclusion: Toward a global environmental sociology

China's environmental entanglements test our concepts and push our boundaries. To adequately account for contemporary environmental concerns, environmental sociologists need to address them. Doing so will enrich our thinking and explanatory capabilities. With respect to ideology, China presents a distinctive terrain of struggle over people's places in the material world. From creative engagements with old ideas to the authoritative world-making of ecological civilization, Chinese people's experiences are critical to understanding the diversity of environmental imaginaries. China's political economy shows that state strategies autonomous from logics of capitalist accumulation are remaking the world alongside neoliberal strategies. Ecological modernization without democratization demands careful reckoning. From perspectives of environmental justice and civil society, working in China offers views into mechanisms of exposure to environmental hazards linked to distinctive institutions as well as the increasingly sophisticated ways authoritarian regimes manage environmental action. Finally, China's changing place in international environmental governance demands that we rethink our models of environmental flows and rule-making. A bipolar 'West vs. the Rest' model can

no longer hold up, and we need new analytics to understand changing international relations. In pursuing these insights, we must be wary of falling into the traps, common in discourse surrounding China, of seeing China's experience as either a universalizing alternative to Western universalizing or as irreducibly particular. We are not arguing that environmental sociologists should flock to China at the expense of the countless other contexts we have neglected. Our point is that doing research in China poses particularly useful challenges, which we would do well to take up.

We are mindful that the promise of doing environmental sociology in China is accompanied by challenges. It has long been difficult for domestic or foreign scholars to do research that veraciously probes difficult situations in China. Barriers have mounted in recent years. While new information transparency platforms make certain forms of social and environmental data more accessible, it can be extremely difficult to research 'sensitive' topics or locales. Within China, the stability maintenance imperatives discussed above yield efforts to contain controversies, making it difficult to document environmental transgressions and the resulting protests. While reports of catastrophes like the 2015 chemical explosion in Tianjin continue to surface, it is hard to gauge how many incidents and protests never see light. Chinese state demands that publishers censor academic publications in China are a serious threat to scholarship worldwide. We remain hopeful that circumstances that hamper the practice of environmental sociology in China will abate. Meanwhile, in spite of these barriers, scholars continue to yield strong research.

Studying China can help environmental sociologists to better account for changing patterns in an interconnected and interdependent world. Emerging scholarship challenges the accepted wisdom of fixed units, categories, and hierarchies, emphasizing instead 'ordinary' features that are neither Western nor 'Third World' (Robinson, 2006). This work investigates flows and connections, both material and ideal, across spatial locations, points in time, and different scales, not just studying what happens in conventional units but taking flows themselves as objects of inquiry, alongside the moorings that anchor human experience of social and biophysical worlds (Bell et al., 2010; Spaargaren et al., 2006). As people in different locales replicate policy models, convey knowledge and expertise, transmit and debate environmental ideologies, and extract, move, process, use, and discard stuff, these flows affect countless lives and landscapes (Rottenburg et al., 2015; Young, 2017). Seen in this light, China is at once creator and recipient of environmental ideologies, consumer and steward of natural resources, perpetrator and victim of ecological harms. China's challenges to established categories present an opening for such inquiries. For example, just as rosewood in Madagascar would unlikely become endangered without the demand for redwood furniture in China, prospects for reining in elephant poaching would be poorer without the Chinese ban on ivory sales. In both cases, the significance of China manifests through tangible flows of commodities and intangible connections of people and ideas, facilitated by multinational corporations, intergovernmental bodies, and transnational advocacy groups alike.

Urging environmental sociologists to turn their eyes to China, we carry forward calls to cultivate a global environmental sociology. We recognize Lidskog et al.'s (2015) exhortation to open conversations across places, across subfields, across disciplines. We are less confident, though, that environmentalists can or should fully transcend political borders to cluster around 'theoretical, methodological or thematic areas' (Lidskog et al.,

2015: 356). We recognize the recalcitrant realities, the hazards, and the virtues of perspectives rooted in particular contexts. Only with difference can there be dialogue. Conversations about environmental sociology need more voices from the global South, where 80% of the world's population resides. Enhancing dialogue around China would make a needed contribution in this vein. This will require dialogue and collaboration among scholars within and outside the People's Republic, each bringing strengths from their particular standpoints. Likewise, the field will benefit as more sociologists from China and across the global South examine environmental predicaments in the US and Europe. We must elevate strong scholarship from within China and be wary of colonization by people and ideas from the North. We should likewise guard against forces that constrain learning and debate within any country. China presents new problems for environmental sociologists and forces us to look at familiar puzzles through a new lens. Rising to this occasion would enrich the conversations through which we are fashioning a global environmental sociology, which is not just a collection of national environmental sociologies, but a hearty and rigorous debate grounded in evidence and theory.

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Note

1. Our use of the singular 'China' for ease of expression should not be taken to homogenize or essentialize the many faces of China. We see China as a set of diverse loci that share certain social and political conditions by virtue of their relationships to the Chinese polity.

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Résumé

De la demande de ressources naturelles aux initiatives liées au développement durable, tout semble aujourd'hui reposer sur la Chine. Les problèmes environnementaux de ce pays rendent nécessaires l'analyse et l'interprétation que pratiquent les sociologues de l'environnement. Des sociologues de l'environnement de Chine et d'ailleurs ont commencé à s'intéresser à la façon dont la société, les institutions et l'écologie interagissent, mais nous n'avons pas encore pris toute la mesure des défis posés par les luttes environnementales de la Chine. Cet article est axé sur quatre domaines dans lesquels l'expérience de la Chine nous invite à repenser nos théories : l'idéologie écologiste, l'économie politique, la société civile et la justice environnementale, et la politique internationale de l'environnement. Dans chacun de ces domaines, les institutions, les discours et la place de la Chine dans le système-monde tendent à redéfinir les grands courants de pensée de la sociologie environnementale. Ces éléments nous engagent à déplacer l'accent mis par les sociologues de l'environnement sur ce qui se passe dans les sociétés libérales du Nord global et à reconsidérer nos arguments concernant le Sud. Ensemble, ces défis sont une occasion de développer nos théories et nos pratiques dans le sens d'une sociologie environnementale plus globale.

Mots-clés

Chine, globalisation, idéologie, justice environnementale, société civile, sociologie environnementale

Resumen

Desde la demanda de recursos naturales hasta las iniciativas de sostenibilidad, todo parece depender hoy de China. Los problemas ambientales de China exigen el análisis y la comprensión que practican los sociólogos ambientales. Los sociólogos ambientales de dentro y fuera de China han comenzado a explorar cómo interactúan la sociedad, la política y la ecología, pero han de enfrentarse todavía a los desafíos que plantean las luchas ambientales de China. El artículo se centra en cuatro ámbitos en los que la experiencia de China nos obliga a repensar nuestras teorías: ideología ambiental, economía política, sociedad civil y justicia ambiental, y políticas ambientales internacionales. En cada ámbito, las instituciones, los discursos y el lugar de China en el sistema-mundo obligan a replantear las principales corrientes de pensamiento en sociología ambiental. Estos puntos plantean el desafío de desplazar el enfoque de los sociólogos ambientales sobre lo que ocurre en las sociedades liberales del Norte global y a reconsiderar los argumentos sobre el Sur. En conjunto, estos desafíos presentan una oportunidad para ampliar nuestra teoría y práctica, creando una sociología ambiental más global.

Palabras clave

China, globalización, ideología, justicia ambiental, sociedad civil, sociología ambiental