

**Toxic Politics: China's Environmental Health Crisis and its Challenge to the Chinese State**, by Yanzhong Huang, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 280 pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-108-81528-4

In *Toxic Politics*, Yanzhong Huang challenges the increasingly popular perception that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can achieve whatever domestic policy goal it sets, as long as the top party leader is serious about it. Since Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader since Mao, has come to power, the CCP – and by extension, the China Model (of development and/or governance) – seems to enjoy growing performance legitimacy at home. From stamping out corruption to poverty alleviation, the Party appears invincible on the domestic front. However, when it comes to the Party's 'war on pollution', which culminated in Xi's anti-pollution campaign in 2017, Huang demonstrates that the results have been very mixed. His thorough investigative work finds that as a result of Xi's extraordinary ambition for environmental clean-up, some visible improvements were made, especially in air quality. However, these improvements were limited, uneven, and ineffective in solving China's still severe environmental health crisis.

The book is organised into five substantive chapters. Chapter one surveys the effects of China's pollution on public health. It relies on a myriad of scientific data to demonstrate that China's environmental health crisis affects the whole country (not just the northern region, which is known for its heavy industry), originated in air, water, and soil pollution (all very serious by Chinese and international standards), and is caused by a lack of environmental protection in the process of rapid development.

Chapter two offers a macro analysis of the economic, socio-political and foreign policy impacts of this environmental health crisis. The main findings include that the crisis has led to productivity losses, collective protest actions, and reputational damage to China's global environmental leadership – all of which suggest that China's rise, which many take as a given, is in fact highly uncertain.

Chapter three traces the emergence and development of the CCP's environmental policy regime from Mao to Xi. It attributes the prominence of a clean environment on Xi's agenda to the increasing intolerance of Chinese citizens towards pollution.

Chapter four examines the implementation of Xi's anti-pollution measures. It is described as a 'coordination mess' (p. 130) in all directions. To begin with, a huge number of government departments were involved, and some worked at odds with each other. Also, local governments were charged with both reducing pollution and generating economic growth, with the latter deemed no less, if not more, important than the former in their performance evaluation. Furthermore, cadres at each administrative level have commonly held their subordinates accountable to emission targets stricter than those set by their higher-ups, in order to prove their loyalty to their bosses. Huang's conclusion is that there were many 'perverse incentives' (p. 120) against effective policy implementation.

Chapter five evaluates the implementation outcomes of Xi's anti-pollution measures. It is shown that as a result of the issues discussed in chapter four, many unintended negative consequences were created in the process of policy implementation. Cadres fabricated air quality data, refused to grant environmental permits to compliant businesses, shut down businesses well below the local emission standards, and removed coal burners from schools

and residents in the freezing winter even when no alternative heating system was available. Importantly, as to whether Xi's anti-pollution measures have actually cut down on pollution notwithstanding these negative consequences, Huang finds that the results have been mixed. For example, the PM 2.5 level, or the concentration of pollutants suspended in the air that are 2.5 microns or less in diameter and can therefore pass through the human respiratory tract, dropped in some months but spiked in others between 2013 and 2017 (pp. 150–56). This was so even though Xi was extremely invested in reducing the PM 2.5 level. Pollutants that were given less official attention, such as ozone, actually increased during 2014 to 2017 (p. 155).

Based on the above findings, Huang concludes that Xi's 'environmental authoritarianism' was ineffective to fundamentally reverse the still severe environmental health crisis. He anticipates that the weaknesses of Xi's approach to tackle pollution will be exacerbated in the near future if economic slowdown poses more pressure on the government to generate growth – which is happening in China today.

The book makes a compelling case that China's 'pollution first, protection later' model has been very costly for the country and its people. The fact that an environmental clean-up could not be successfully carried out, even by one of the most authoritarian and well-resourced governments, should deter any country, especially developing countries, from a single-minded pursuit of economic growth at the expense of the environment. This raises significant questions on the environmental implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), given that one of its objectives is 'to export surplus Chinese steel, cement, and other materials to smaller markets along the economic belt' (p. 79), with the 'smaller markets' being developing countries.

Despite the importance and merits of this book, I find two of the inferences that the author draws in relation to Chinese politics based on Xi's anti-pollution campaign slightly shaky. The first inference is that China's environmental health crisis still haunts or will haunt the CCP's performance legitimacy, notwithstanding visible (though uneven) improvements in pollution control under Xi. This inference is under-substantiated as the book discusses little of how the Chinese people have perceived the mixed outcomes of Xi's anti-pollution campaign.

The second inference is that in order to reverse China's environmental health crisis, the implementation of anti-pollution measures should rely more on public participation and place 'less emphasis on performance and more on rule of law' (p. 190). Some explanation of why more effective authoritarianism is ruled out as an effective solution for reversing the environmental health crisis would be helpful.

If these inferences were drawn more systematically, it would strengthen the central premise of the book: China's toxic environment is a result of toxic politics.

The book will, in any case, be extremely useful for anyone interested in China, pollution, public health, and development.

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