Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro. 2020. *China goes Green: coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet*. Cambridge: Polity. Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1509543120. US$22.95, 245 pages.

Reviewed by Kofi Gunu. Email: kofi.gunu "at" queens.ox.ac.uk

Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro's *China goes Green: coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet* is broad in scope and rich in implications that resonate beyond China, and across a variety of issues. We are in a time when the West's democracies—including the United States and the United Kingdom—have shown themselves either incapable and/or unwilling to respond effectively to the current global pandemic (Fernando 2020). The authors' object of inquiry is the coercive, state-led, authoritarian approach to environmental governance that has emerged in China in the last decade or so. This style of eco-authoritarianism, characterized by decisive crackdowns and specific targets, has been lauded by some observers as the ideal one, if the world is to avert catastrophic climate change. However, as Li and Shapiro argue in *China goes Green*, whether or not these interventions yield benefits to the environment seems incidental to their true goal—"the intense consolidation of political and epistemic power in the hands of the Chinese state" (p. 24). The central claim of the book is that Chinese policymakers are and will be most successful at stemming environmental harms when they reject top-down, cookie-cutter solutions in favor of genuine consultation with civil society groups, local communities, and other stakeholders.

The last forty years of Chinese history have coincided with a dramatic transformation in the country's environmental image. Following Premier Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in the late 1970s, China became the world's factory and also its largest carbon emitter. China's leaders, unwilling to relinquish impressive growth rates, frustrated any international agreement that would bind them to absolute carbon emission targets. Xie Zhenhua, China's chief climate negotiator, was nicknamed "Mr. No" by his foreign counterparts for how reliably he rejected climate deals (Zhu and Qi 2017). China led a coalition of developing countries known as the G-77 plus China which consistently invoked "common but differentiated responsibilities"—the principle that developed countries are the principal emitters of greenhouse gases and should therefore bear the primary responsibility for addressing the climate threat.

A major turnaround came in November 2014 when President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Barack Obama co-signed the *U.S.-China Joint Statement on Tackling Climate Change*. For the first time, China committed to a hard target, pledging to peak carbon emissions by 2030. It acceded to the 2015 Paris Agreement two years later. Domestically, the government launched a massive national effort to build an "ecological civilization", or *shengtai wenming* 生态文明, a phrase which has since become the country's guiding political philosophy. Environmental regulatory institutions have been strengthened, polluting industries phased out, and the sale of ivory banned. Today, China leads the world in the production and use of clean technology. Compared to the partisan rancour and gridlock that attends climate politics in the United States, China's authoritarian system of government appears particularly adapted to making the radical changes required to confront the ecological crisis. According to Professor Daniel Bell, a renowned expert on Chinese politics and philosophy, this system permits meritocratically selected leaders to make long-term-oriented decisions to safeguard the wellbeing of the environment, unencumbered by the short-term interests of either voters or powerful advocacy groups (Bell 2015).

Rather than accepting China's perceived efficacy with regards to the environment, Li and Shapiro assert early on that "the resulting policies have advanced the state's agenda for power consolidation but produced a mixed record in environmental and social terms" (p. 27). The authors document a disturbing pattern in which Beijing appears to have co-opted the goal of planetary sustainability to further long-standing plans for curtailing individual and cultural freedoms, while expanding the reach of the state. The outcome: a range of top-down, heavy-handed solutions that have been just as likely to increase ecological harms as to reduce them. In Chapter 1, which focuses on China's domestic environmental policies, they tell the story of the government replacing Shanghai's informal but efficient garbage sorting system powered by migrant workers, with a mandatory one which subjects urban dwellers to ever-more intrusive restrictions. Chapter 2 details how, under the guise of environmental protection, the authorities have embarked on a program of forced resettlement and 'green-grabbing' in the sparsely populated west of the country, home to the Uighurs and other ethnic minorities. Chapter 3 and 4 provide an account of 'green China' on the global stage. On the one hand, China has increasingly

branded its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and advanced technologies as eco-friendly models of progress, while on the other, it continues to spearhead the finance of questionable infrastructure and coal-fired power projects worldwide. The picture that emerges is of a Chinese state that is primarily interested in self-preservation and which perceives the green mantle to be a convenient means to that end. Channelling James Scott's magisterial critique of high modernism in *Seeing like a state* (1998), the authors demonstrate through case studies that this state-centred approach seldom produces sustainable solutions.

Yet this is not a book about how authoritarianism is infinitely worse for the environment than the liberal free-market societies found in the West. In one of the many subtle moments in this work, Professors Li and Shapiro show that democracies are not immune from these coercive tendencies. For instance, as many articles in this journal show, the Norway-initiated REDD+ program, which fights deforestation in developing countries, has garnered negative attention for similarly side-lining indigenous communities, who often find themselves barred from forests on which they depend for their very livelihoods. But the book's best insight is that there exists a homegrown alternative to the Chinese state's hard-nosed approach. In examining the few successful green policies in China, the authors identify the presence of a counterintuitive dynamic they term "mutually agreed-upon coercion", a phrase they borrow from Garrett Hardin's classic essay *Tragedy of the commons* (1968). A policy's chances of success sharply increased when the state incorporated a broad cross-section of non-state voices at the formulation stage. This was the case on the Loess Plateau, the site of China's first large-scale reforestation program. When the project began in the mid-1990s, the government first charged a team of local and international experts to device the best afforestation strategy for the region. The team spent two years engaging with local farmers and villagers, and at the end, introduced an integrative rehabilitation program that balanced the state's objectives with local needs and the complex topography of the Plateau. Cases like the restoration of the Loess Plateau worked out "not because [the state] acted in any way that was less coercive, but because the flexing of coercive muscle was based on extensive consultations with non-state actors ranging from international scientists to local peasants" (p. 26). Subsequent efforts to replicate these success stories have mostly floundered as officials disregard outside input in their haste to meet lofty targets (Zhang 2018).

Li and Shapiro make two refreshing contributions to studies of environmental politics. **First**, their focus on both environmental implications and non-environmental spill-over effects—namely the suppression of individual rights and public participation and the monopolization of political power by the state, in China's case—is a welcome counterpoint to the bulk of scholarship on environmental governance, which has tended to present the two as siloed domains instead of entangled sites. The scope of *China goes Green* ultimately transcends narrowly ecological concerns and allows readers to trace the dynamic relationship between green ambitions and the state's insatiable appetite for control.

Second, the book captures the evolving complexity of the policymaking process within China. For readers who are used to viewing the Chinese state under the leadership of the Communist Party as one repressive monolith, parts of this book would come as a surprise. A mix of horizontal and vertical lines of authority, sometimes in conflict with one another, have served as *de facto* checks and balances on the arbitrary exercise of power. For example, Deng Xiaoping instituted a policy of "Separation of Party and State", or *dangzheng fenjia* 党政分家, in 1987 which subordinated the Communist Party to the National People's Congress, the State Council, and other central state institutions when it comes to day-to-day government operations. Similarly, the state has permitted moments of democracy, such as localized protests against polluting factories (Schmitt and Li 2019), which Li and Shapiro credit for China's isolated environmental successes. Under ongoing centralization efforts being pushed by President Xi, however, these "pockets of democratic strength" (p. 26) are fast disappearing. This, coupled with unconditional faith in the ability of value-neutral technocrats to fix the country's ecological challenges, has ensured that there are now limited safeguards against the state's worst instincts.

A range of questions emerge from a work of scholarship this textured and multi-layered. For brevity I will highlight two. **First**, what lessons does China's experience hold for international and transnational actors? One of the limitations of the book, good though it is, is that in one sense it is profoundly state-centric. Although the authors occasionally allude to the mishaps of private corporations and international organizations, the nature of their topic leads them to concentrate overwhelmingly on the excesses of the sovereign state. It is hard to escape the impression that the primary target of the book's warnings are other national governments which may be flirting with eco-authoritarianism. Yet these cautions are just as relevant for do-gooder companies and transnational organizations. One particularly interesting question raised by this book is the normative one of

what should be done about a state which implements green policies in a manner that infringes on the human rights of its citizens and/or actually leads to further degradation? Does this call for supersessionist international institutions with the power to override the state, as R2P (Responsibility to Protect) is supposed to do in the case of genocides? What is the guarantee that such a super-charged international body would not fall prey to the same blind spots that constrain the state? A topic for further research, perhaps.

Second, there is an insufficiently addressed tension in this book between the authors' careful documentation of the Chinese state's ruthlessness, and their periodic insistence that the state is motivated by good intentions. Which of these two mechanisms is the more accurate is a question that holds implications for the plausibility of an alternative model built on mutually agreed-upon coercion. While the former requires a fundamental realignment of the central government's motivations, the latter merely points to changing the short-term interests of bureaucrats further down the chain of command.

The authors of *China goes Green* bring to their analysis a deep connection with their subject matter and a commitment to approaching it from multiple angles. The result is a profound and well-informed book. By exposing the spill-over effects of coercive environmentalism in China, they recast and expand the contemporary understanding of the stakes as the world confronts the challenge of climate change.

References

Bell, D. 2015. *The China model: political meritocracy and the limits of democracy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fernando, J.L. 2020. The Virocene epoch: the vulnerability nexus of viruses, capitalism, and racism. *Journal of Political Ecology* 27: 635-684.

Hardin, G. 1968. The tragedy of the commons. *Science* 162(3859): 1243-1248.

Li, Y. and J. Shapiro. 2020. *China goes Green: coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet.* Cambridge: Polity.

Schmitt, E. and H. Li. 2019. Engaging truthiness and obfuscation in a political ecology analysis of a protest against the Pengzhou Petroleum Refinery. *Journal of Political Ecology* 26: 579-598.

Scott, J.C. 1998. *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zhang, Q. 2018. Managing sandstorms through resettling pastoralists in China: how multiple forms of power govern the environment at/across scales. *Journal of Political Ecology* 25: 364-380.

Zhu, M. and Y. Qi. 2017. A shift toward climate leadership. *China Daily.* December 9. http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2016-12/09/content_27618063.htm?from=groupmessage&isappinstalled=0.

***

Kofi Gunu is an MPhil student in International Relations at the University of Oxford, UK and a Rhodes Scholar.