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Climate change: the China Challenge

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- 1 Both these works, as suggested by their titles, focus on the environmental challenges confronting China and raise the issue of the sustainability of Chinese economic development. They share a common objective, that of addressing the question of the environment in China in the most comprehensive way possible, by giving, in order, an account of the current situation with regard to the ecological problems, the administrative and legal context of environmental protection, the ecological movements and the international co-operation initiatives in terms of environmental protection. Elizabeth Economy's work provides an integrated, coherent approach, while the collective work edited by Kristen Day is composed of more or less stand-alone analyses by contributors from a range of backgrounds: academics, lawyers, environmental consultants, scientists and militant ecologists. At the same time as analysing the social, political, economic and environmental forces at play, both works are complementary of each other in the way they bring out the tensions between economic development and environmental protection. This complementarity is

reinforced by the contribution made by Elizabeth Economy herself to the collective volume (Chapter 4).

- 2 The opening chapter of Kristen Day's work, written by Cynthia Cann et al. offers an overview of the environmental problems and challenges confronting China in a context of strong economic growth, particularly since the implementation of reforms in the late 1970s. Similarly, based on a detailed case study of the chronic pollution of the Huai river caused by thousands of small enterprises, especially in the paper manufacturing sector, the first chapter of Elizabeth Economy's work puts into perspective the conflict, on the one hand between the imperatives of economic development and the need for environmental protection, and on the other between the management practices of the central government and of the local authorities in the case of an ecological problem. The analysis is then extended to cover the country's other major environmental questions such as deforestation, desertification, the scarcity of water resources and air pollution in urban areas. Economy explains environmental destruction within the context of a traditional Chinese culture which paid scant respect to nature, as well as of a long history of exploitation of natural resources to the detriment of the environment (Chapter 2). However, both works are in agreement by highlighting economic, institutional and political factors as the main causes of the increasing speed of deterioration of the environment in contemporary China. Economy's Chapter 3 makes an assessment of the economic and health costs caused by damage to the environment that are thought to amount to 8%-12% of GDP annually. She also points out that environmental problems are now a serious threat to social stability, which the Chinese government is trying to preserve at all costs, given the harm in terms of public health and mass migration brought about by pollution and environmental degradation.
- 3 Faced with these challenges of various kinds—ecological, economic, social and political—the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to protect the environment by establishing a formal administrative and legal structure and by strengthening the role of civil society and foreign players. These efforts make up the major theme of both works and each devotes four chapters to it (chapters 4 to 7 in Elizabeth Economy's book and chapters 3 to 6 in the collective work). Chapter 4 of Elizabeth Economy's volume and Chapter 3 of Day's, written by Ferris Jr and Zhang, recount the central government's efforts to put in place an administrative system for managing environmental affairs since China's inaugural participation in the United Nation's 1972 International Conference on Human Environment. After many ups and downs, these efforts resulted in 1998 in the birth of the National Bureau for the Protection of the Environment (Guojia huanbao zongju), the highest government body (with ministerial rank), specialising in the management of environmental affairs. The efforts to establish a comprehensive legislative framework for environmental protection are also noteworthy, as is attested by the proliferation of laws, rules and standards passed by the National Assembly, the State Council and the relevant Ministries dealing with these environmental issues. However, the fourth chapters of both works, written by Elizabeth Economy, highlight the gap that exists between legislative developments and the actual application of the laws and rules. For administrative, economic and political reasons, the environmental decision-makers have neither the administrative powers nor the financial means to have the laws and rules applied and respected, as these rules and laws are in any case often poorly defined or quite simply inapplicable. As both works point out, the devolution of responsibility for the environment to local governments

has made the protection of the environment locally even more complex. The local offices for environmental protection, which depend on the local governments for their budget, salaries, housing for employees, premises, etc., often give in to the wishes of the local authorities who tend to sacrifice the environment in favour of economic growth. Thus, a good many local environmental protection offices are unable to perform their role independently in terms of supervision and control of pollution in enterprises, by dint of their weak administrative powers, their limited budget, as well as lack of equipment and poor training of their employees. Moreover, decentralisation lies at the root of significant regional disparities in terms of environmental protection at the local level. Elizabeth Economy thereby shows that rich regions, like the municipalities of Shanghai or Xiamen (Fujian province) allocate significantly more financial resources than do the poor regions like the province of Sichuan where environmental protection is not yet a priority for the local authorities.

- 4 In this context of decentralisation, the central government basically relies on campaigns of mass mobilisation, an old practice inherited from the bygone dynastic era and which reached its climax under Mao (1949-1976). Among these campaigns can be mentioned the National Programme for the Protection of Natural Forests (Tianranlin baohu gongcheng) set up in 1998 to fight against deforestation, the National Programme for Reconversion of Arable Land to Woodlands and Grasslands (Tuigeng huanlin huancao gongcheng) implemented since 1999 to combat soil erosion, and the major works projects underway for redirecting waters from the south to the north (nanshui beidiao gongcheng). For want of a participatory approach or one taking into account local conditions of application, these campaigns often encounter difficulties when it comes to implementation and have had only qualified success. Elizabeth Economy particularly emphasises the discrepancy between the formulation of central environmental policies and their application, through the case of the recent Development of the West campaign (Xibu dakaifa). Indeed, although protection of the environment is listed among the six basic principles of this campaign, the National Bureau for the Protection of the Environment does not appear as one of the twenty-two government agencies responsible for the programme's implementation.
- 5 Faced with the scope of the environmental challenges, the Chinese government is calling on all internal and external forces dedicated to the cause of environmental protection. In particular, it has delegated a part of the responsibility for the environment to civil society by encouraging the development of environmental NGOs. Chapter 5 of Elizabeth Economy's work brings out the growing role, both centrally and locally, of these various Chinese NGOs in the preservation of nature and environmental education, in spite of severe restrictions imposed by the government on their existence and spheres of activity. In the context of China's opening up to the outside and the globalisation of environmental problems, various forms of international co-operation have also rapidly developed with all sorts of foreign players, whether they be national governments, international bodies like the UN, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, international NGOs or multinational firms (Chapter 6 by Elizabeth Economy and Chapter 5 by Turner and Zusman in Kristen Day's edited volume). Both works seem to show that co-operation between China and its foreign partners are fruitful, most notably in four areas: the planning of environmental policies, the capacity-building for environmental management, technology transfers, and the tightening of environmental requirements in the context of trade agreements such as those of the WTO. Elizabeth Economy takes the analysis further in her Chapter 7 by

presenting the experiences of other countries that could be useful for China's sustainable development, those that have managed to reconcile economic growth and environmental protection.

- 6 Similarly, the final part of Kristen Day's work (chapters 6 to 9) offers a series of case studies that enable her to illustrate on the one hand the scope of the environmental problems in China as well as the economic and institutional constraints in play, and on the other the central role played by Chinese social actors and foreign partners in environmental protection. Chapter 6 by Morgenstern et al. brings out the co-operation between the Asian Development Bank and the municipal government of Taiyuan (the capital of Shanxi province) in the establishment of a system of emission trading quotas aimed at reducing atmospheric pollution. In Chapter 7 Wang and Li bring out the environmental implications of the evolution in the structure of the country's energy consumption and advocate a reduction in the consumption of coal in favour of cleaner sources of energy. Chapter 8, by Millison, recounts the development in the treatment of dangerous waste materials and the gradual introduction of a "clean production system," by placing greater importance on improving management than on technological progress. Finally, Wang and Wu (Chapter 9) study the relations between human activities and desertification in northern China, pointing out the need for a participatory approach and a strengthening of the legislative and judicial system in the fight against desertification.
- 7 In conclusion, both these works offer interesting analyses of the issue of the environment in China, along with illuminating analytical and empirical case studies. It is worth noting, however, that while the contributors to the collective work edited by Kristen Day mostly confine themselves to environmental themes, Elizabeth Economy in addition addresses politically more sensitive subjects such as the relations between the effectiveness of environmental protection and democracy, the possibility for political changes in China brought about by foreign influence, or the activities of environmental NGOs, some of which are beginning to make political demands. However, these political changes are unlikely under a totalitarian regime which gives no real signs of weakness, and are not necessarily desirable given the lack of any general awareness among the population of the need for environmental protection. Indeed, as Lee shows in Chapter 2 of Kristen Day's work, many opinion polls reveal a very low level of environmental awareness among the general public in China and the population's lack of interest in the environment compared to its major concerns in terms of income, employment and education. In this context, the environment could be further sacrificed in favour of economic development under a democratic regime. Consequently, at the present time, it seems more important for environmental NGOs and activists to concentrate their efforts on the environment itself and promote education about it rather than call for political changes. Finally, although both these works offer few concrete solutions to the current ecological crisis, they comprise two key reference works for knowledge about and an understanding of the environmental challenges and the system for environmental protection in China.
- 8 Translated by Peter Brown