China Perspectives

2018/1-2 | 2018

New Approaches to the Political Regime Under Xi Jinping

Jean-François Huchet, *La crise environnementale en Chine. Evolutions et limites des politiques publiques* (Environmental crisis in China: Evolutions and limits of public policies),

Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2016, 152 pp.

Sandra Poncet

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7934>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.7934

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2018

Number of pages: 118-119

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Sandra Poncet, « Jean-François Huchet, *La crise environnementale en Chine. Evolutions et limites des politiques publiques* (Environmental crisis in China: Evolutions and limits of public policies), », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2018/1-2 | 2018, Online since 01 June 2018, connection on 24 September 2020.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7934> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7934>

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1 Jean-François Huchet is a professor at INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, Paris), specialising in contemporary Chinese economy and society. His latest work, *Environmental Crisis in China*, offers an update on environmental problems confronting the country as well as a discussion of factors behind the crisis and perspectives for their resolution. His argumentation spotlights the role of public policies in chapters enriched by his previous research on the state's part in China's industrial development, thus vindicating the subtitle, "Evolutions and limits of public policies."

- 2 The book's main aim is to highlight the unprecedented magnitude of China's environmental crises and the dearth of public policies to tackle them. Despite (very late) attention and adoption of major legal and administrative measures to combat environmental degradation, China is still far from putting in place the basis of long-term environmentally sustainable growth. Beyond the rhetoric in the highest echelons, such as Premier Li Keqiang's 2014 announcement of a war against pollution, China seems unready as yet to deal with the deep causes of environmental crisis, such as reviewing the primacy of growth in light of the absence of coordination within the fragmented economic and political apparatus. The authorities have certainly not shown the capacity to adopt the rules needed to genuinely take on powerful industrial lobbies and ensure appropriate financial compensation for losses stemming from the adjustments required (factory closures, adoption of clean technologies, etc.).
- 3 The book's chapters are organised in three parts. The initial four chapters describe the current extent of pollution in China. The first chapter deals with air pollution, the second water pollution, the third soil degradation, and the fourth the problem of waste. China's environmental situation has evolved rather rapidly since early this century due to accelerated economic growth relying on construction and heavy industry as well as rapid population growth and urbanisation. The interest in these chapters lies in the latest statistics they contain, gathered from both official Chinese sources and international institutions, making for a fuller overview of the various sources of pollution. The analysis is precise and well-documented. The first part takes full note of the complexity of pollution problems, especially the combination of different pollutants. Huchet makes an incontrovertible observation: China's environmental crisis is unprecedented, not only in the magnitude of pollution but also as it affects all domains of the ecosystem.
- 4 Europe and the United States also experienced major environmental crises before China, such as the Great Smog of London in 1952 (which caused 12,000 premature deaths) and ozone pollution in California, which led to school closures in the 1970s. The

authorities there acted swiftly and brought pollution down to acceptable levels. China's specificity lies in that all indicators are red, the levels of pollution much higher than those provided for in measuring apparatuses. Chinese authorities need to urgently adopt measures on several fronts simultaneously in order to limit the effects, seemingly staggered over time, of pollutants whose ramifications are little known. Chapter 4 on the uncontrolled increase in industrial and household waste—the number of its pages limited to three—is emblematic of the extent of grey areas when it comes to pollution problems and challenges standing in the way of their resolution. China's situation paradoxically stands out, as results have been slow despite popular awareness and new legislation, suggesting that the proclaimed ecological transition is proving to be more difficult than envisaged. Changes in air pollution are a case in point. Data on particulate concentration available since 2009 illustrate the failure of government policy in improving air quality in Chinese cities, at least until 2014. After some improvement in 2015 and 2016, particulate concentration seems to have picked up again in 2017.

- 5 Parts II and III help explain why progress has been so slow. Part II deals with structural dimensions unique to China that account for both the magnitude and persistence of problems. Huchet identifies them as the political and economic roots of the crisis. The first is an institutional and intellectual framework inherited from the Mao era, which harps on capacity through collective effort and political willingness to overcome all opposition, including constraints posed by nature. The choice of farming practices under Mao thus led to adverse climatic and physical conditions, depleting resources and disrupting structurally fragile ecosystems. The same was the case with the industrial strategy, which lacked consideration for efficiency and environmental consequences. The post-1978 reforms unfortunately failed to change this logic. An analysis of discrepancies in China's industrial organisation is the book's strength, appropriately anchored in the author's previous studies. He describes a pursuit of growth-at-any-cost in a locally compartmentalised production system where producers are all powerful, caring little for economies of scale. Production growth is invariably achieved by ignoring, or even consciously flouting, environmental protection rules. Chapters 2 and 3 of Part II focus respectively on the demographic pressure and addiction to coal that compound the deleterious repercussions of the country's economic development. Between 1990 and 2016, China's population increased by 244 million, per capita income soared, and the rate of urbanisation rose from 26% to 57%. These in turn further boosted demand for new housing and infrastructure (more cement, steel, glass, etc.), for electricity, cars, and in short all goods characterising Western lifestyles. These put additional constraints on the manoeuvrability of public policies targeting pollution. Chapter 3 on China's coal addiction makes a now well-established accusation: its abundance in the country and low cost relative to other energy sources that China would have to import explain its predominance in the energy mix despite its propensity to pollute at every stage from extraction to combustion. China's coal consumption accounts for half the world's total and takes place in conditions that are three times less energy efficient than in rich countries. Coal's standing in the energy mix (62% in 2016) is the main reason for particulate emissions and greatly contributes to soil pollution and water shortages.
- 6 Part III, dealing with the changes in and limits of public policies confronting the crisis, reveals the author's relatively pessimistic outlook. Chapter 1 describes the exceedingly slow changes in governmental and legislative measures for environmental protection.

On paper, there are of course notable advances: China boasts of some of the most restrictive environmental laws and regulations worldwide. A new 2015 law allows authorities to shut down firms seriously contravening pollution norms, whereas earlier they were only able to levy far from dissuasive fines. Among the most notable advances in the Chinese context of censure and defiance from non-governmental organisations are greater transparency with regard to pollution and emissions data and protection for whistle-blowers on environmental issues.¹ The list of those entitled to lodge complaints with law-enforcement authorities over violation of environmental norms has been expanded to include pollution victims and NGOs. In subsequent chapters, Huchet considers various structural obstacles that prevent laws from being respected on the ground. The most interesting developments described in these chapters discuss the pitfalls of economic policies, picking up from Chapter 1 of Part II. The author describes how Chinese industrial organisation stymies efforts favouring the environment. He depicts the industrial structure as a superposition of two systems: the first planned and centralised, including major state enterprises in strategic sectors such as energy, and the second totally fragmented and displaying a duplication of local economic systems without heed to specialisation. Despite reforms envisaging rationalisation of production and efficiency gains, the imperatives of safeguarding jobs and of fiscal resources have led local authorities to shelter inefficient and polluting firms through direct subsidies or channels of bank credit. Huchet doubts whether changes underway can break the existing crony links and collusion between governments and firms at the local level. He describes in an interesting manner the parallel strategies of local actors for frustrating measures to reduce over-capacity and regulate pollution in highly polluting sectors such as cement and steel. The revision by 17% of official coal consumption figures for 2015 to correct local under-reporting is a sad commentary on this state of affairs. Another glaring passage in the last chapter notes the emission reduction efforts and rapid progress achieved at coal-fired thermal plants under direct state control. Especially during the conception of new plants, the central government can easily impose stricter norms and achieve major emission cuts, mainly of PM₁₀ and SO₂. However, there has been far less success with PM_{2.5} particulates, whose emissions are more dispersed across sectors (cement, steel, automobiles, etc.) and more difficult to control technically. Political will to impose environmental rules falters before powerful lobbies at the central and local administrative levels. In this regard, it would have been interesting if the chapter had touched on the bureaucratic infighting pitting the environment ministry against the China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) and Sinopec Group over the adoption of stricter emission norms for diesel trucks and buses, given the poor quality petrol supplied by the two firms.

- 7 The book offers a precise and up-to-date account of the environmental stakes and rightly stresses that the challenges are eminently political. Two aspects deserve greater attention. The first is the spatial dimension of China's environmental problem. Are the Chinese authorities ready to sacrifice part of the objectives of economic growth and job preservation in poor provinces so as to meet demands for improving quality of life, especially as expressed by urban residents in the coastal fringes? Poor localities often have no choice but to host waste-ridden activities expelled from wealthy cities, as they depend on fiscal receipts and GDP growth. Reduction in overall pollution cannot happen without addressing this spatial facet and reducing income inequalities. The second aspect is the international dimension: whereas China is the world's top investor

in renewable energies, its actions abroad are largely out of step for a country claiming to be combating pollution and climate change. In fact, China is the world's biggest exporter of coal mining equipment and is engaged in building more than 100 coal-fired electric plants abroad, some in countries with strong solar energy potential. One issue not broached in the book is that emission reduction in China may be happening in part due to the export of pollution. Projects backed by major state-owned banks, especially as part of "One Belt One Road," could lead to so-called pollution havens. That will happen as China's environmental norms progress to the extent of sending most of the polluting activities no longer tenable on its soil, such as power generation, to less vigilant countries.

NOTES

1. The book does not mention the growing success of the Blue Sky application launched in 2015 by the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), a non-profit entity headed by Ma Jun, who has received several international prizes for his environmental activism in China.

AUTHOR

SANDRA PONCET

Sandra Poncet is professor of economics at Université Paris 1 and is currently on deputation from the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) to the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC) (sandra.poncet@univ-paris1.fr).