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The Ecological Consequences of Developmentalist Modernism

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Abstract

This commentary argues that Stevan Harrell's *An Ecological History of Modern China* offers valuable insights into the transformation of ecosystems, which reflect the lived experiences of Chinese people. It examines some of the more contentious claims found in the book, particularly its treatment of politics. It suggests that, while Harrell downplays the importance of party politics and ideological campaigns, the ecological transformations he describes are inextricable from the turbulent political contexts in which they unfolded, from the local politics of village governance to the global politics of the Cold War. It concludes by suggesting that it is Harrell's extensive research experience as an ethnographer that has allowed him to write such a vivid and insightful history of modern China.

Keywords

ecological history, environment, ethnography, politics

I still recall one of my earliest attempts to conduct an oral history interview. It was around 2008 and I asked an elderly gentleman how he felt his city had changed since his youth. Having read a great number of history books, I was

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expecting his answer to be framed by the monumental events that they described, such as the Sino-Japanese War, the Cultural Revolution, or Reform and Opening. To my dismay, he began talking about how his city had once been dotted with numerous small lakes, most of which were now reclaimed and covered with concrete. I chalked this interview up as a failure, but this pattern seemed to continue. An elderly woman I spoke to suggested that the biggest change she had witnessed was the decline in air quality, while all that a group of farmers I interviewed seemed to want to talk about were the mountains of plastic that now cluttered their village. It became a source of frustration to me that my interlocutors seemed unwilling to discuss what I considered to be the significant events of their history. When I eventually learned to listen to their answers, I came to realize that what they were describing was a deeper historical change, one that had unfolded alongside the factional political battles I had read about in books. This was the transformation of the Chinese ecosystem.

With the publication of Stevan Harrell's monumental new study *An Ecological History of Modern China* we finally have a book that not only describes this transformation, but also explains how and why it occurred. The book begins with an epigraph from John Muir: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Harrell certainly lives up to this holistic vision. He offers an encyclopedic account of changing Chinese ecosystems, largely focused on the period since 1949. Whereas other scholars have incorporated this period into longue durée accounts of environmental change (Marks, 2012) or have focused on specific periods or themes (Shapiro, 2001; Smil, 2004), none have offered a more comprehensive and incisive account of the ecological transformation that has occurred under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) state.

Readers should be aware that the ecology referred to in the title is very much a human ecology. They should not come expecting descriptions of pandas lazily chewing bamboo or snow leopards stalking distant mountains. Instead, they will encounter pigs crammed in such great numbers in industrial farms that they end up contracting swine flu, fish driven to extinction by pollution, crops dangerously dependent upon a cocktail of agrochemicals, and algae choking the life out of rivers. This is not to suggest that Harrell's book simply describes a litany of destruction. He resists the temptation, criticized by William Cronon (1992), to reduce environmental history to a tragic "declentionist narrative." Indeed, toward the end of the book there are even some moments of hope, such as when he describes positive steps toward tackling air pollution.

Though this is a book rich in empirical detail, its greatest contribution is not the wealth of knowledge it imparts, but the conceptual models it offers to

process this knowledge. Harrell describes various kinds of "buffers," including the ecological, institutional, infrastructural, and cultural (Harrell, 2023: 16). These can be used, for example, to explain the evolution of water-control problems. Prior to human intervention, lakes and wetlands provided ecological buffers against excess waterflow. When these were reclaimed, humans were forced to substitute infrastructural buffers such as dykes and polders. Such systems ensnare humans in what Harrell terms "rigidity traps," which allow systems to function adequately only as long as there are sufficient human inputs. Tubewells, which make agriculture possible in arid areas, are another example of a rigidity trap. Elsewhere, Harrell describes how communities are continuously forced to invest in a "fix to fix the fix"—remedial measures made necessary by the failure of past remedial measures. Other scholars have expressed similar ideas. Christian Pfister (2009), for example, described how a piecemeal form of "cumulative learning" prevents disaster-vulnerable communities from adopting meaningful forms of systemic change. Yet none have encapsulated this fundamental foible of development in a pithier and more accessible manner than Harrell.

Undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of Harrell's book will be the extent to which he downplays the role of politics. Early on, he claims that, in ecological terms, there was little to distinguish the CCP from their Chinese Nationalist Party rivals. The ideologies of these two political parties, about which so much blood and ink have been spilled, were merely two branches of the same form of "developmentalist modernism." This argument echoes suggestions made by Prasenjit Duara (2009), who has long noted that, despite the antagonisms between these parties, both shared a commitment to "hegemonic modernity." More controversial, perhaps, is Harrell's suggestion that the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was of little consequence to the broader ecological history of China. This may ruffle a few feathers, but it is entirely justified. Harrell is not trying to downplay the horrors of the Maoist era, but instead to shift our attention back a decade. He argues that it was the Great Leap Forward (1957–1961) that marked the true nadir of Maoist "hyper-anthropocentrism." The bitter irony being, of course, that at the same time that humans were being centered as the masters of nature they were also being starved to death in unprecedented numbers.

Harrell waits until his conclusion to drop his biggest bombshell (Harrell, 2023: 434). Here he argues that the environmental history of the People's Republic of China has not been substantially influenced by its authoritarianism. The trajectory China has taken, he insists, is not substantially different from that of its immediate neighbors, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. (North Korea, the most authoritarian nation in the neighborhood, is missing from this list.) Of all of Harrell's arguments, this is the most liable

to be misunderstood. It would be easy to interpret him as suggesting that politics itself is largely irrelevant, and that modern humans have been a blight on the environment, no matter where they are or what they believe. This is not my reading. Harrell does not seem to be rejecting politics in all its forms but is rather suggesting that individual governance systems all experienced a similar journey through the so-called Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC). This model suggests a universal trajectory whereby industrializing societies initially undergo a period of intense environmental degradation, which later abates as their economies become more service-orientated and citizens demand greater health and environmental protections. The EKC is far from a perfect model. Harrell himself observes that it does not apply in all cases, and elsewhere has noted its teleological nature (Harrell, 2020). Nevertheless, when the trajectories of individual East Asian nations are compared systematically using the EKC (Harrell, 2020), marked similarities do reveal themselves. Thus, there is certainly some evidence to support Harrell's argument that those who insist upon comparing the credentials of specific governance systems are merely indulging in the narcissism of small differences.

Does this mean that politics in all forms is irrelevant? Certainly not. Harrell's book is full of politics, from local political systems that govern resource flows within villages to national political systems that seek to replumb whole hydrological systems. As to global politics, it can surely be no coincidence that every East Asian nation entered the most destructive phase of its EKC journey during the Cold War. This was an era, as John McNeill and Corinna Unger remind us, where rival powers were willing to make "drastic interventions in the workings of the biosphere," the consequences of which we will likely be experiencing for the next hundred thousand years (McNeill and Unger, 2010: 3). While Harrell may be right that both state socialism and industrial capitalism were equally destructive at the same stage of capital accumulation (Harrell, 2023: 323), the conflict between the two surely brought out the worst instincts of each. As Mark Elvin (2004) has observed, throughout thousands of years of Chinese history warfare caused humans to sacrifice the environment to a "logic of short-term advantage." In this respect, the period of "environmentally unconscious developmentalism" that Harrell describes between 1961 and 1998 cannot be disentangled from this global political conflict, and the dangerous imperative to short-term advantage that it engendered.

In his prologue, Harrell suggests that he began working on this project in 2007, yet the impression that readers will surely be left with is that this is a book that has been fifty years in the making. The photographs and observations included date back to the 1970s, when he began his career as

an ethnographer, first in Taiwan and later in China. Numerous personal observations gleaned from this long career are used to animate the text. He takes us onto the streets of Tianjin in 1980, where he witnessed earthquake victims living in shoddy shelters. Later, he allows us to eavesdrop upon his conversations with villagers, who, when asked why they continue to drink contaminated water, reveal, tragically, that they are habituated to pollution. Beyond providing a deep reservoir of personal observations, Harrell's research career has equipped him with the sensibilities of an anthropologist, which he brings to bear upon his historical subject. As Tim Ingold suggests, "to study anthropology is to study *with* people, not to make studies *of* them," and this provides anthropologists with "the intellectual means to speculate on the conditions of human life in this world" (Ingold, 2017: 21). Though on the surface this book is based upon a prodigious number of written sources, it is the deep hinterland of personal knowledge that Harrell has accumulated during a long career studying *with* people that allows him to speculate so effectively upon the interaction between humans and their ecosystems.

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