

# **Book Review**



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Judith Shapiro, *China's environmental challenges*, 2nd edition, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016, 228 pp. + xxiv.

In 1979, the author Judith Shapiro from the United States first came to China when her government established diplomatic relations with China. She wrote this book and two others while in the mainland. An academic, she now teaches in the Global Environmental Politics programme at American University in Washington, DC.

This is a well-researched and balanced book about one of the great problems of our time – how the world's second largest economy and the largest country with the largest carbon dioxide emissions is working to deal with its environmental problem, with significant implications for the rest of the world. The answer is complex and contradictory, and the responsibility lies in the foreign responsibility for the consumption of goods in China and with the national government and the people. Environmental issues are becoming China's top priority, and it is the turning point for China: “Human must conquer nature” is not a valid argument anymore.

*China's environmental challenges* takes the form of environmental policy guidebooks or contemporary Chinese student handbooks, as well as manuals for the people who are interested in this area. Its 228 pages is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter ends with a series of questions and several links to websites for further discussion by the

readers. This book is thus suitable for high level of teaching and learning. The book is based on a compilation of second-hand sources, specializing in articles devoted to environmental issues in China, documentaries and some personal interviews, as well as communications with the author. The environmental theme is served by a multidisciplinary approach focusing on five key analytical concepts of globalization, governance, national identity, civil society and environmental justice (related to the fields of political science, environmental anthropology, human geography, environmental history and environmental economics). After introducing China's environmental problems and challenges, the book, in its second chapter, details the factors that affect the natural environment of the country: the overburden, the rise of the middle class, globalization and industrialization, urbanization, reduction of arable land, climate change and other factors. The third chapter focuses on the institutional and legal framework of China's governance system. The fourth chapter looks at the issue of national identity and the creation of China's sustainable development model. The fifth chapter deals with the emergence of civil society and the political orientation of people's participation in national environmental issues. The penultimate chapter presents the issue of equality and environmental pollution in China as well as wider scope of poverty in the world. Finally, the author concludes by pointing towards a path that China may pursue and also reflects upon the possible role of the developed countries in it.

This new edition has incorporated updated data and trends since 2012, including the tensions caused by the impact of the *Under the Dome* video as well as more details of the strategies used by the government and non-governmental organizations to guide the public towards more sustainable choices in their lives. There is also a much more in-depth discussion of the global impact of China's quest

worldwide for resources to promote its economic growth and social advancement.

This makes this edition even more important for those who are interested in this area, though the fact that Shapiro argues that the history of China's environmental challenges began in the Mao era could represent a fundamental weak point in her argument. China lived on one of the most fertile areas of the earth since some three thousand years ago, when human activities were already at a disadvantage. This fertility was the catalyst for the developments of China's science, engineering and administrative systems, and the robustness of these systems was in turn a major reason for China's long-term environmental degradation.

China and the earth are at a crucial moment; the road towards a more sustainable development model is still open. But, as Shapiro persuasively argues, making this choice will need humility, creativity, and denial of business as usual. The window of opportunity will not be open for a longer time. In order to achieve sustainable development in China, the country needs knowledge and expertise from developed countries but ultimately also needs to solve its own significant internal problems in its own way. Shapiro's point of view is that there is no simple solution, but all the pieces are there to solve the puzzle; yet it will take much collective effort – both domestic and international.

This book represents a brilliant textbook that should be recommended to the people who are interested in how rapid economic growth has taken a toll on China's environment. It also provides important lessons for anyone who might still hold the optimistic perception that the country is full of gold. *China's environmental challenges* is the foundational text many of us have been waiting for.

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## **Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal**

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**Hong Kong Twenty Years after the Handover: *Quo Vadis?***

*Focus Issue Editors: Joseph Y.S. Cheng and Emile K.K. Yeoh*

***Foreword*** – Upon the Twentieth Anniversary of the Hong Kong Handover: An Update on State-Civil Societal Relations 523  
*Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh*

***Introduction*** – The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: 1997-2017 549  
*Joseph Yu-shek Cheng*

Human Rights Development in the First 20 Years of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 575  
*Chong Yiu Kwong*

Localism in Hong Kong: Its Origins, Development and Prospect 617  
*Yiu-chung Wong*

Social Construction of National Reality: Chinese Consciousness versus Hong Kong Consciousness 657  
*Fu-Lai Tony Yu and Diana S. Kwan*

Catholic Church-State Relations in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: A Review of 20 Years 687  
*Beatrice K.F. Leung*

Contextual Analysis of Hong Kong Education Policy in 20 Years: The Intention of Making Future Citizens in Political Conflicts 713  
*Steven Chung Fun Hung*

*(Continued on next page)*

“Expressing my attitude and doing something impossible to make it happen ...” – Listening to the Voices of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement Protesters <i>Tim Nicholas Rühlig</i>	747
Chinese-style Democracy as a Political Project for Meaning-Construction: Old Wine in a New Bottle? <i>Benson Wai-Kwok Wong</i>	819
Enforcing the Right to Family Life in Hong Kong Courts: The Case of Dependant Policy <i>Matthew Chuen Ngai Tang</i>	849
Hopes against Hobbes: On Authoritarianism, Regime Legitimation and Soft Power with a Review of Richard C. Bush’s <i>Hong Kong in the Shadow of China: Living with the Leviathan</i> (2016) <i>Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh</i>	889
<b>Research Note</b> – Human Rights Are Human Rights: Asian Values, Chinese Characteristics and Universal Values <i>Chien-yuan Tseng</i>	989



# **Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal**

Volume 3 Number 1 April/May 2017 (Special Issue) ISSN 2410-9681

## **Norms and Institutions in the Shaping of Identity and Governance: Mainland China and Taiwan in the Regional Environment**

*Special Issue Editors: Wen-cheng Lin and Emile K.K. Yeoh*

### **Foreword**

- Mainland China and Taiwan in the Asia-Pacific: Norms, Institutions, Identity and Governance 1  
*Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh*

### ***Geopolitics and Economic Relations***

- Differences in East Asian Economic Institutions: Taiwan in a Regional Comparison 27  
*István Csaba Moldicz*

- China and Soft Power: Building Relations and Cooperation 71  
*Audrey Dugué-Nevers*

- An Assessment of the China-Korea Free Trade Agreement: Implementation Outcome and Influencing Factors 103  
*Meiling Wang and Chun-Kai Wang*

### ***Norms, Institutions and Realpolitik: History and Evolution***

- Political Reforms in a Global Context: Some Foreign Perspectives on Constitutional Thought in Late Imperial China 139  
*Egas Moniz Bandeira*

- Rethinking Peace-Building in East Asia: The Case of Japan's Struggle over History in Postwar Era 187  
*Xiaohua Ma*

- Russia-Taiwan Relations: History and Perspectives 213  
*Sergey Vradiy*

*(Continued on next page)*

### ***Biopolitics and Social Wellbeing***

Institutional Approach to Anti-corruption Efforts in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China: Improving the Norms, Strengthening the Ethics 247  
*Olga Yurievna Adams*

The Rights of the Wronged: Norms of Nuclearism, the Polygon and the Making of Waste-life 285  
*Aliya Sartbayeva Peleo*

China and India Going Green: The Power of Wind, International Norms, and National Commitments 331  
*Silvan Siefert*

### **Policy Comments**

The Dialectic Characteristics of Policies for Asia-Pacific Regional Relations 367  
*Ching Chang*

Independent Planning System and Public Administration in Metropolitan Development: Agglomeration Strategies of Greater Chaoshan in Southern China 395  
*Tian Guang, Kathy Tian, Camilla H. Wang, Liu Yu and Li Wei*

Housing in China: State Governance, Market and Public Perception 433  
*Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh and Wang Fan*

### **Letter to the Editor**

Letter from Claude Meyer, author of *China or Japan: Which Will Lead Asia?* London and New York: Hurst, with Columbia University Press and Oxford University Press (2012) 507

### **Book Review**

Weiwei Zhang (ed.) (2012), *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State* 517  
*reviewed by Chang Le*