



Photo courtesy of Didem Aydurmus | 2012

The Green Republic of China

Didem Aydurmus

Have you heard about China's latest crackdown on pollution? [Forbes writes](#), it is "estimated that 40 percent of all China's factories have been shut down at some point in order to be inspected by environmental bureau officials." This is amazing. As one of the highest contributors of pollution in the world, the People's Republic of China can make a huge difference for all of us. While *Forbes* points out that higher prices for consumers can be expected, I imagine a world where China steps up its game and comes to save us. Yes, maybe not much changes, but let me dream a little. Obviously, I know that it is too late to stop climate change, that all the rivers are already polluted, and that at some point the last fish might die. Still, I am inspired to write here.

'Autocratic China?', you might ask. 'Exactly'. If you pay attention to writings on sustainability, you will notice that China's potential is highlighted on a regular basis. China is "capable of acting quickly and decisively, having accepted the reality of climate change" (Dryzek et al. 2013:Loc. 1484). However, the case is often dismissed – either because the authors do not see green tendencies in Chinese politics, or because they just do not want to think about a non-democratic country having an edge over democracies in what boils down to the most fundamental aim of governance: survival. I hope more and more people face the truth. Democracy has a head start in legitimacy, since at the very least people 'chose their

poison'. But this also means that democracies are less dependent on their actual performance.

It is often argued that the Chinese government rests its legitimacy on its economic output. [Smith](#), for instance, writes that Xi cannot change the paradigm even if he wanted to, because the regime's legitimacy is too dependent on economic growth and because –surprise– power is too widely shared. The former argument might be less strong than it appears though. The PRC has witnessed [many protests against pollution](#) and surely suffered from its economic-growth-above-all politics. Since environmental problems are already a great source of discontent, it is wrong to focus on economic performance as the only legitimization. Economic growth, though still blindly celebrated, cannot be the sole target of an administration and is not. There are too many other issues and any growth is doomed to eventually slowdown making a shift to a different legitimization inevitable. It is naïve to believe that a cleaner environment cannot lead to higher approval rates and that nondemocratic governments must be blind to this possibility.

Tong argues “the current regime legitimacy is maintained because of the historically rooted moral bond between the state and society and the societal expectation that the state would be responsible for the wellbeing of the population” (2011:141). No clean air, no well-being!

Furthermore, the system makes good output not only necessary, meritocratic structures also have the potential to facilitate advances in good green governance. In order to succeed leaders have to show excellent records at every step of their careers. Beijing is not oblivious to pollution. In fact “the promotion of cadres in experimental low-carbon-emission cities such as Hangzhou is based on criteria that incorporate environmental, energy, and climate-change related performance criteria” (Bell 2015:Loc. 1081). Evidently, GDP has stopped to be a measurement of officials' performances in many smaller cities and instead poverty and environmental quality have become part of the evaluation (Bell 2015, see also Gilley 2009).

Whereas a major factor in the bad environmental record of autocracies was their concentration on economic growth, the shift in evaluation plausibly means a major step towards the advancement of environmental governance. Bell asserts that the “reason for China's pollution problem is that in the past cadres tended to be promoted almost exclusively based on standards that measured economic growth, but wider assessment criteria are being used now: targets for pollution control are being linked to cadre evaluation processes” (2015:Loc. 1078).

There is philosophical advantage a meritocratic regime will have over any democracy. Whereas the public is less likely to engage in the consequentialist thinking indispensable as a basis for green governance, an expert chosen on this very basis is by definition motivated to expand the morally relevant community. If leaders can be picked for their environmental success, they are likely to be good at sustainable politics. If leaders are picked for their protection of the commons, i.e. the environment, they are likely to further think in terms of the protection of the commons. Moreover, “[m]eritocratically selected leaders can make

long-term-oriented decisions that consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations” (Bell 2015:Loc. 3377). Democratically selected ones are seen as bound to the voters’ will. We should all note that we do a very bad job at ensuring that future people will have a viable planet.

There is another aspect that speaks for the potential of a strong government to seek sustainability. Governments are also more likely to take the whole society into account and maintain public goods for the benefits of society than private actors. This is independent of the regime type. The waves and waves of privatization in many countries in contrast make environmental politics increasingly difficult. Burnell points out that “[t]here is an important analytical distinction between the political freedom of a regime to make political choices favouring climate mitigation over the economy with or without incurring political risk (the political opportunity structure) and the executive capability to implement and enforce the policy choice, which is a matter of governance” (2009:14). Here, Smith might be right that contrary to intuition power in the PRC is too widely shared for drastic change. Governments that are in charge of a vast part of the resources can implement strict environmental laws, and therefore protect local ecosystems. The politburo’s latest actions demonstrate what holding power can mean in this regard. Developments should be watched closely.

As with any other system, ideal and real types diverge. The Chinese regime is marked by “evaluations at each step of the way, to move further up the chain of political command” and though still flawed “has been substantially ‘meritocratized’ over the past couple of decades and the political impact of ‘meritocratization’ has been far more substantial than the widely reported and researched local-level elections” (Bell 2015:Loc. 3322). In Oreskes and Conway’s vision of the future, China leads the world (2014). When it comes to the environment Randers is also optimistic: “By 2052, China will have shown the world how a strong government is much better at solving the type of challenges humanity will face in the twenty-first century” (2012:Loc. 4369-74). There is a basis on which upon a People’s Green Republic could be built. A system of regulations, laws, and incentives, including clear punishments, is the most effective tool for greening. A greener China would change the world.

Power conceivably carries responsibility (see Jonas 1984:174). Confucius and Spiderman alike knew that great power brings great responsibility. I wish for a Chinese government that is guided by such a view. It would be a great contrast to the individualistic culture of overconsumption that can be found globally. The need for smart responsible leaders is greater than ever. We are still on a path of extinction.

References:

Bell, D. A. 2015. *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Kindle Edition: Princeton University Press

Burnell, P. 2009. *Is Democratisation Bad for Global Warming?* Working Papers. Coventry: University of Warwick.

Dryzek, J. S., R. B. Norgaard and D. Schlosberg 2013. *Climate-Challenged Society*. Kindle Edition: Oxford University Press.

Gilley, B 2009. *The Right to Rule. How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*. Chichester: Columbia University.

Jonas, H. 1984. *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Oreskes, N. and E. M. Conway 2014. *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tong, Y. 2011. Morality, Benevolence, and Responsibility: Regime Legitimacy in China from Past to the Present. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16(2):141-159.

Didem Aydurmus is a Cultural Anthropologist who got a PhD in Political Science and maintains that the latter is a subdiscipline of the former. Her area of expertise are ethics and environmental politics, though she falls into the category generalist. She is an activist and avid defender of animal rights, hence vegan. She likes to entertain unconventional ideas and discuss tradeoffs.

For a more detailed discussion see [Survival despite the People: Democratic Destruction or Sustainable Meritocracy](#).

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/green-republic-china/>