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Critical Book Review
of
Mao's War Against Nature

Throughout history, China has engaged in massive environment-management projects. From the “Dujiangyan irrigation works, built during the Qin dynasty (to) the Grand Canal, built in the seventh century to link North and South China,” China has transformed the earth to accommodate its large population.ⁱ In *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, author Judith Shapiro focuses on the destructive environmental policies implemented by Chairman Mao's government from the years 1949-1976. According to Shapiro, Mao's reliance on the Soviet model of industrialization combined with his authoritarian, military-focused perspective to devastate China's natural resources. Further, Shapiro argues that Mao's “degradation of the natural world” was connected to “human suffering.”ⁱⁱ She convincingly demonstrates both the tribulations of the Chinese populace under Mao and the terrible environmental impact of his unscientific policies; however, her thesis that these two are necessarily connected is less persuasive.

The primary examples of human suffering in *Mao's War Against Nature* are Beijing University president Ma Yinchu, who warned China's top leadership about the country's population growth, and hydro-engineer Huang Wanli, who cautioned against a Soviet-influenced plan to dam the main stream of the Yellow River.ⁱⁱⁱ Both of these men endured professional marginalization and scripted public humiliation because of their critical opinions—both of which proved to be accurate. These two individuals receive specific attention due to their privileged positions in China's hierarchy, but millions of others suffered from forced migrations, back-breaking manual labor, and agricultural mismanagement. Simple slogans such as “In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai” were printed in Chairman Mao's ubiquitous

“Little Red Book” and motivated people to accept these sacrifices.^{iv} Similar slogans were used to portray the destruction of the environment as a patriotic duty.

“Man Must Conquer Nature” was a central tenet in Mao’s policy environmental policy.^v Statistical evidence is hard to come by due to governmental secrecy and lack of rural records, but the few statistics Shapiro does provide paint a grim picture: “10 percent of China’s forests were cut down within a few short months”; a “net loss of 29 million hectares of farmland” from 1957-1977; and over five hundred lakes filled in the Hubei province alone.^{vi} Shapiro’s most investigated example is the destruction of the wetlands in Lake Dian in 1970. Located in the Yunnan province, Lake Dian was renowned for its beauty and warm climate. When a section of its wetlands was filled during the Cultural Revolution, locals complained the weather became worse and the water turned from clear blue to murky and inhospitable for fish. The simplified agricultural policies that devastated Lake Dian created a national crisis of poverty, famine, population explosion, and soil depletion. Shapiro has concluded that the concurrence of Mao’s failed land policies with his authoritarianism indicates an inherent relationship between environmentalism and politics. Unfortunately, it is not that simple.

In *Mao’s War Against Nature* Shapiro expresses the hope that China’s history can provide “a deeper understanding of the connection between political repression and environmental degradation.”^{vii} To complicate her argument we only need to look at the United States of America. A modern democracy, the U.S is led by publicly elected officials; however, consumerism, industry, and an emphasis on property rights have contributed to a disproportionate amount of the world’s pollution. Further, as Shapiro acknowledges in her introduction, China’s abuse of the natural world was supported by “the often willing participation of millions of Chinese people, at all levels of society, whose traditional culture played a critical role in suppressing dissent and in promoting overambitious development projects.”^{viii} Theoretically, we can also imagine a tyrant environmentalist who ruthlessly curbs business

opportunities in order to protect the flora and fauna. It follows there is no logical requirement that authoritarianism leads to an attack nature. In China's history, the role of the Soviet Union—both in advocating large industrial projects and, later, by posing as a military threat—and Mao's ignorance of farming techniques played a greater role in land destruction than the authoritarian nature of the government. In fact, at times the efficiency of the government was of benefit. One instance of this is when Mao completely reversed the family planning policy in just three years.

Shapiro, who is a professor at American University and was one of the first Americans to work in China after Nixon's historic visit, does an excellent job of illuminating a little-known aspect of Mao's legacy. She goes too far when she tries to move beyond describing this history to providing a theoretical political explanation for the history. Today, China's burgeoning industry threatens to create a new era of environmental destruction. Unfortunately, many Chinese citizens are reluctant to implement environmental standards because they believe it is "their turn" to enjoy economic growth. Government sponsored NGO's—how Chinese is that?—seem to be emerging as a useful network for advocating change. Western advisors and academics would be wise to follow Shapiro's lead in searching for answers within China's historical context. If Chinese leaders could frame environmentalism as rooted in Confucian, Buddhist, or Taoist ideals, popular participation might be possible.

ⁱ Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, xii

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 5

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 106

^v *Ibid.*, 67

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 82, 13

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 24

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 2