

From Sandstorm and Smog to Sustainability and Justice

China's Challenges

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Blue Sun over Beijing

From March 14 to 27, 2021, a severe sandstorm that started in the Eastern Gobi Desert steppe swept across the Mongolian Plateau South, the Loess Plateau, the North China Plain, and the Korean Peninsula. Beijing and twelve provinces in China were hit by the worst sandstorm in a decade. In Beijing, on March 15, a blue sun appeared, as the red rays were absorbed by the sandstorm particles. In a 2015 sandstorm, PM_{10} (coarse atmospheric particulate matter) was at 1,000 micrograms per cubic meter – 30,000 tons of sand fell onto Beijing, amounting to 1 kilogram of sand per capita for the city's population. The 2021 sandstorm, however, was more severe as $PM_{2.5}$ (fine atmospheric particulate matter) levels reached a height of 680 micrograms per cubic meter and PM_{10} were 8,108 micrograms per cubic meter. The World Health Organization guidelines for safety levels of $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} for twenty-four hours are, respectively, 25 micrograms per cubic meter and 50 micrograms per cubic meter.

As for smog, a few days before the sandstorm arrived, Beijing authorities issued a yellow warning – the second-most severe level of a four-tier air pollution warning system. According to a Community Modeling and Analysis System-Integrated Source Apportionment Method model that determines the source of air pollutants, 35 percent of pollutants came from Beijing and 65 percent from outside.¹

How do we understand these figures of sandstorm and smog? For the sandstorm, two factors are given as explanations. One is global warming. In Mongolia, the average temperature in March 2021 was 5 to 8 degrees Celsius higher than the usual -4 to -14 degrees Celsius. The average temperature of Mongolia in the last eighty years has risen by 2.25 degrees

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Celsius. The second factor is said to be the Mongolian cyclone caused by low atmospheric pressure. This cyclone has once again approached high levels after a decade of having abated.

With little precipitation, “the combined action of the Mongolian cyclone and the cold high pressure,” Zhang Bihui, director of China’s National Meteorological Center, stated in March 2021, “provided a strong impetus for the sandstorm,” carrying sand and dust from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia and the central and western deserts of inner Mongolia.² Warming of surface temperature was also due partly to continuous desertification: 40 percent of Mongolia is desert and 75 percent of its land area is arid. If it is a matter of irresistible natural phenomena, one would have to be resigned to accepting this as ill fate and devise ways to adapt or mitigate the effects. However, the ecological issues in Mongolia in the last two decades have been seriously aggravated by overgrazing and mining, human factors that have contributed to the destruction of grasslands and desertification. In strictly economic terms, Mongolia could pride itself on the highest economic growth rate of double digits in the world in the first decade of the millennium, and even when the growth rate came down to one digit in the last few years, it still surpassed that of China and India. The reason? The economy has been boosted by mining.

Gold and Copper

Mongolia hosts 10 percent of the world’s coal reserve and operates eleven coal mines. Furthermore, the Oyu Tolgoi gold-copper mine in the Gobi Desert, 80 kilometers from the Mongolia-China border, is being developed as the biggest mining project in the world. *Oyu Tolgoi* means *turquoise hill* in Mongolian, due to the color of the copper exposed to oxygen. The site was constructed in 2010 and started exporting copper in 2013. Some people even jokingly call Mongolia “Minegolia,” but behind this is the tragedy of a ravaged environment for traditional herders as mining drains huge amounts of water resources. The UK-based mining giant Rio Tinto and Canada’s Ivanhoe Mines own 66 percent of the mine; the Mongolian government owns 34 percent of the mine. The open pit mine of 2 square kilometers in phase one was expanded into a surface subsidence of 8 square kilometers with block caving in phase two in 2015.³ Relocation of the Bor Ovoo spring for the mine denied herders access to water for their livelihood and for the herding pastures. Rio Tinto later drew water from the Gunii Hooloi aquifer, a 150-meter-deep resource holding around 6.8 billion cubic meters of non-drinkable saline water that is used for processing ore. The mining giant claimed that Oyu Tolgoi used around 420 liters of water to process a ton of ore and stressed that this was half of the

industry average, as if half the industry's average were not an excessive devastation of water resources, with the mine processing about 100,000 tons of ore daily. The huge scale of mining is thus contributing to the process of desertification (dustbowlification).

Mongolia's increasing dependence on extractive industries displaces traditional crafts, such as the cashmere industry, and makes the country vulnerable to vacillations of prices in the global mineral markets.⁴ The March 2021 sandstorm highlights the environmental consequences of the extractive industries that have aggravated the stress on ecological equilibrium.

However, Mongolia is not solely to blame for the March sandstorm. Intensifying global warming has meant that the extremities of the weather, causing floods in some regions and droughts in some others, are affecting the entire world.

Licorice and Poplar

Historically, the northern regions in China were periodically affected by severe sandstorms, hence the moving of the capital on several occasions, such as from Xi'an to Luoyang in 904, during the Tang dynasty, and subsequently in 960, the Song dynasty set Kaifeng as its capital. The problem of desertification in northern China is thus a longstanding problem.

According to the 2015 national survey on desertification, the desertified area constituted 27 percent of China's total area, concentrated in the five northwestern provinces of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Gansu, and Qinghai. An additional 18 percent of land was arid. The Chinese government estimated that the land area affected by desertification was about 3 million square kilometers, about one-third of China's total land area, and desertification expanded at an annual rate of 2,640 square kilometers, leading to loss of 5 billion tons of topsoil. Degradation of indigenous vegetation also meant diminishing water resources.⁵

The biggest afforestation project that the Chinese government has invested into is the Three-North Shelter Belt Project, also known as the Great Green Wall Project. It was launched in 1978 and planned for seventy-three years, until 2050, during which 35 million hectares of shelterbelt forests and vegetation would be set up along a windbreaking green belt measuring 4,480 kilometers east to west and 560 to 1,460 kilometers north to south. The Three Norths, referring to the north, northeast, and northwest regions with a total area of 4.069 million square kilometers, constitutes 42.4 percent of China's total land area. Forest cover is planned to increase from 5.05 to 14.95 percent. Growing trees would also offer local residents timber. On the fortieth anniversary of the project, in 2018, the government announced that forest cover had increased from 5.05 to 13.59 percent.⁶

The massive Great Green Wall Project carries another mission besides containing desertification and fending off sandstorms. The new forests are supposed to serve as carbon sinks, though there are reservations on the lack of biodiversity as distinct from old-growth vegetation.

The March 2021 sandstorm was quite a disappointment, as the increasing intensity and scope of sandstorms seemed to defy the human efforts of all these years. The sandstorm cast some doubts over the effectiveness of this mega afforestation project. The project is necessarily ambitious in order to counter the acuteness of the problem of desertification. The determination of the Chinese government is a positive factor in the design and implementation of the project. However, success of a project of this scale necessitates active engagement of the local population and a respect for the differences of localities.

There are “success” stories in the afforestation project. The Kubuqi Desert greening project has been acclaimed by the UN Environment Programme as an “eco-pioneer” and praised by the December 2015 Paris Summit on Climate Change. Within thirty years, one third of the Kubuqi Desert in Inner Mongolia, with an area of 6,000 square kilometers, had been greened. The region is 800 kilometers to the west of Beijing. Licorice and cistanche, drought-resistant Chinese medical herbs, are planted. They hold and fertilize the arid soil and at the same time bring income to the local people.

However, there are also “failure” stories. Zhang Jianlong, director of the State Forestry Administration, told a reporter in an October 2016 interview that, in some regions, in order to seek immediate results, large areas became monoculture plantations growing poplars. Poplar cuttings were planted, as they grow rapidly and require low maintenance. There were reports on massive deaths of the poplar in the last twenty years. For example, from 2007 to 2013, in Zhangbei County, 200 kilometers from Beijing, 33,000 hectares out of 43,800 hectares of poplar shrunk and died.⁷ Several problems arose. Rapidly growing trees have a shorter lifespan, so vast stretches would die and need to be replaced after thirty to forty years. Additionally, monoculture planting causes poplar borers and diseases that destroy the trees. In some places, fearing that the poplar saplings may die, several times the appropriate number of trees were planted, leading to crowding.

One other problem is that the poplar requires adequate watering, so its drawing on water inadvertently further depletes underground water resources in some regions. Scientists have commented that the introduction of trees to arid areas could have the negative impact of trees taking up too much ground water. The rapid drop in groundwater levels is pronounced in many parts of the desert and arid regions. For example, Minqin County in Gansu Province, once an oasis at the junction of two

deserts, suffered from serious water shortage due to the water of the upstream Shiyang River being diverted for irrigation purposes, and serious droughts in the 1990s. The evaporation was twenty-three times the precipitation. Its underground water level dropped by as much as 0.5 to 1 meter per year. Village wells were drilled down to 300 meters and some still dried up.⁸ In the 1980s, local villagers developed 30,000 hectares of farmland from arid soil, which put a further stress on water resources. In 2007, the government took drastic measures, setting a quota of 6,900 cubic meters of irrigation water for each hectare, forbidding high water consumption items such as onions, closed 3,018 wells, and reduced farmland by 29,450 hectares. Large numbers of the population were moved out as environmental migrants. The population of Minqin County had dropped from 300,000 in 2000 to 240,000 in 2019, losing 20 percent of its population within less than two decades.⁹ In 2015, Minqin County was acclaimed as a model in containing sand erosion. With the government's intervention, Minqin now has a greener outlook and a better ecological environment. Yet the question needs to be asked: At whose expense?

Starting in 2000, massive migrations took place due to the reestablishment of ecological equilibrium. Over seven million migrants left their homes in northwest China, but life of resettlement was not at all easy. In early 2021, the television drama series *Minning Town*, representing the lives of environmental migrants, became very popular (it will be shown abroad with subtitles in various languages). Some catchphrases are: in the resettlement area, the villagers say, "we have only one draught of wind every year, it blows from spring to winter" and "When will the future ever arrive?" This reveals a contradiction: generations had lived in difficult circumstances, fighting and adapting to the adverse environment. Nature is given a chance to recover when people move out, but resettlement life for migrants may not be improving and income may not be stable. Without a decent living and farming or working environments, many migrants have chosen to leave their resettlement areas and become "labor migrants."¹⁰ This social plight is prevalent, hence the popularity of the television series.

Greening Urban-Rural Fringe Zones

Massive migrations are happening not only in afforestation projects or dam projects, but also at the fringes of metropolitan cities. An example is the eviction of migrants from Daxing.

Today, Daxing District is a developed, orderly, and green zone hosting the airport in the southern suburbs of Beijing. In the last few decades, due to its proximity to the center of the capital, Daxing underwent a rapid process of urbanization. In a mere span of forty years, the northern

belt of Daxing took a few leaps, from agricultural production to textile manufacturing, to small-scale industrial enterprises, to a tertiary sector of warehouses, logistics, and small businesses. These transitions went hand in hand with several “upgrades,” with expulsions of migrant laborers and industries in the northern belt of the district in 1995, 2011, and 2017. With an influx of labor-intensive manufacturing, such as the textile industry in the 1980s, and the development of industrial compounds in the villages in the 2000s, local villagers no longer farmed but leased their plots to small-scale industries, logistics, and services in the 2010s. In this urban-rural fringe zone, in the early winter of 2017, a major fire broke out in an apartment building in the town of Xihongmen, resulting in nineteen dead and eight injured. An investigation found that the fire was caused by a malfunctioning circuit in a cold storage located on the underground floor of the building. The three-story apartment building, with an area of about 20,000 square meters, had been a “tri-functional” structure that combined warehouses, factories, and residential units. On the underground floor were cold storages, on the ground floor eateries, small shops, textile workshops, and so on, while the first floor and part of the second floor were residential rental units; a total of three hundred small rooms were rented to more than four hundred migrant workers.

Two days after the fire, the authorities quickly moved to justify evictions for the sake of eliminating “potential safety hazards.”¹¹ With an eviction deadline, tens of thousands of “non-local” migrant workers in suburban areas of Beijing – factory workers, food service personnel, couriers, and construction workers – as well as their families, old and young, hastily moved out of their rental homes and workplaces. In just the town of Xihongmen alone, 120,000 migrant workers and thousands of small enterprises were expelled within two weeks. At the same time, original rural households, instead of renting out their land to migrant workers, were organized through a new government pilot scheme to put together their fragmented land pieces (distributed to individual households under the reform program) for auctioning in the land market. Daxing District was one of the thirty-three pilot experiments across the country. The first lot of 26,700 square meters was traded in 2017 at ¥805 million for a usage right of forty years. The villagers became stockholders, taking dividends off their land.

In the meantime, Daxing moved on its upgrading. Apart from the new airport, it now hosts a modern façade of high-end commercial buildings, middle-class residences, and ecological green zones. It has shed the “backward” primary sector, the secondary sector, as well as a “low-end” tertiary sector.

Between 2015 and 2019, Beijing’s migrant worker population was reduced by 770,000.

Carbon Neutrality

In 2017, going along with the eviction of “low-end” populations from urban-rural fringe zones, the authorities implemented drastic measures in banning coal burners. It was near the end of the government’s five-year plan (2013 to 2017) to improve air quality through a “no-coal zone” for Beijing, Tianjin, and twenty-six cities in the provinces of Hebei, Shanxi, Shandong, and Henan (known as the 2 + 26 scheme). In this region, every year, thirty-six million tons of low-quality coal was burnt by rural households for heating and cooking, constituting 10 percent of coal used but 50 percent of pollution.¹² The final push in 2017 to eliminate household coal burners when winter was setting in caused much distress as gas supply was inadequate but coal burners had already been banned and destroyed.¹³ The air quality, however, did improve. At the end of 2019, the rate of clean-energy heating in the rural areas of northern China (not limited to the 2 + 26 zones) was about 31 percent, up 21.6 percentage points from 2016. By 2019, about twenty-three million households in rural areas in northern China had replaced bulk coal with clean energy, including eighteen million households in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, its surrounding areas, and the Fenhe-Weihe River Plain.¹⁴

Doing away with household coal burners was necessary but insufficient to curb air pollution. Even the drastic reduction of human activities and economic production in 2020 during COVID-19 shutdowns contributed only to a temporary improvement in air quality. China has been the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide since 2007, but as the world’s factory, the pollution responsibility should not be taken up by China alone. The global consumer community should be responsible for the ecological footprint, especially the United States, which in 2018 had more than twice the per capita carbon emissions of China.¹⁵

In September 2020 at the UN General Assembly and in December 2020 at the Climate Ambition Summit, China pledged to achieve peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality (net zero emissions) before 2060.¹⁶ The pledge is that, by 2030, China will “lower its carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by over 65 percent from the 2005 level, increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 25 percent, increase the forest stock volume by 6 billion cubic meters from the 2005 level, and bring its total installed capacity of wind and solar power to over 1.2 billion kilowatts.”¹⁷ In February 2021, China implemented a set of interim rules for the management of carbon-emissions trading. From 2012 to 2019, energy consumption per unit of gross domestic product was reduced by 24.4 percent, equivalent to 1.27 billion tons of standard coal. In this period, China saw an average annual growth of 7 percent in the economy, while annual energy consumption rose by only 2.8 percent. The government re-

port of 2021 pledged that energy consumption per unit of gross domestic product and carbon dioxide emissions per unit of gross domestic product in 2021 will be reduced by 13.5 percent and 18 percent, respectively.¹⁸

The share of non-fossil fuel consumption in China had risen from 19.1 percent in 2016 to 24.3 percent in 2020. Coal remains the basic energy source. In 2019, coal consumption accounted for 57.7 percent of total energy consumption, but this was already a decrease of 10.8 percentage points from 2012; the consumption of so-called clean energy (natural gas, hydropower, nuclear power, and wind power) accounted for 23.4 percent of total energy consumption, an increase of 8.9 percentage points over 2012. China's renewable energy resources have expanded rapidly, with cumulative installed capacities of hydropower, wind power, and solar photovoltaic power each ranking top in the world. The total installed capacity of nuclear power plants under construction and in operation reached 65.93 million kilowatts, the second largest in the world.

Reduction in fossil fuel consumption would certainly be welcome. However, the emphatic use of the term *clean energy* with respect to nuclear power, presented in a positive light, needs to be scrutinized. In particular, nuclear energy risks irreparable damage. The Fukushima nuclear power plant catastrophe continues to be a nightmare.¹⁹ The Japanese government's proposal in April 2021 to dispose of 1 million tons of contaminated water into the sea garnered international outcry, yet the cruel fact is that the reason for the incessant generation of 140 tons of radioactive water a day comes from a far more hideous monster. In the last ten years after the explosion of reactors one and three of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in March 2011, almost nothing has been, or could be, done to handle the radioactive mass/mess of the nuclear meltdown inside the two reactors. The sight of the ruined reactor buildings may have become a sight too familiar to draw attention, but what lies within is concealed from public sight. Proclaiming nuclear energy as "clean" veils the catastrophic risk.

Alternatives?

The approach to climate change and the mainstream "remedies" proposed require serious attention. As Gustavo Esteva has noted, the terms *climate change* or *global warming* are too mild to have a strong impact on general perception. The term *climate collapse* is a much more accurate rendering of the immense challenge for the whole of humanity. However, in the mainstream, the symptoms may be dealt with, but the fundamental problem is not. As in the case of the disposal of radioactive water in Fukushima, which certainly deserves concern, the fundamental question to be asked is how to stop more contaminated water from being generat-

ed, so the limelight needs to fall on the molten nuclear mass inside the reactors. In the same manner, the solution is not setting carbon-emission trading quotas, because this presumes emission can continue after purchasing a quota; business as usual. In the same manner, the crucial question is not to choose between fossil fuel or renewable energy, but to interrogate the paradigm that consumes so much energy. Thus, the entire paradigm of modernization and development as we know it, which has persisted for over two centuries, needs to be interrogated and radically changed. We cannot have business as usual, or lifestyle as usual for the elites, and suffering and sacrifice as usual for the subaltern.

China, given the scale of its problems as well as the scale of its population, economy, and resources, is in a position to make a significant contribution to a turn in the trajectory for humanity – this century may see catastrophic consequences for life on earth, including humans, if we cannot avoid a global warming of 2 degrees Celsius.

Thus, while there are proposals for remedial measures, these may be futile if some key orientations are not pursued. In 2020, despite the global pandemic, China's total input and output value was ¥32.1557 trillion (\$4.93 trillion), an increase of 1.9 percent over 2019. With the sanctions and hostilities from the United States and its allies in the unfolding of a New Cold War, China, in May 2020, pronounced a “dual circulation strategy,” which essentially means readjustment of its four-decade-long strategy of integration into the global economy since 1978, which was to contribute massive human and environmental “resources” to support an export-oriented economy. The term *dual circulation strategy*, apparently giving equal importance to the two strategies, in essence means adding “domestic circulation” to the four-decade-long prominence of “external circulation.”

However, if this strategy of turning inward is compelled by hostilities and instabilities in the external world, it would vacillate depending on external factors. It does not necessarily mean a self-chosen turn to self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and a proactive path of “delinking” from the impositions of the United States and its allies. If the shift is to be made toward “internal circulation” based on “delinking” from the hegemony and impositions of the United States and its allies, a major reversal of the four decades of export-oriented economic development will need to be carried out.

For China and the semi-peripheral and peripheral countries to pursue a path of autonomy and delinking from the U.S.-dominated capitalism, and capitalism itself, radical alternative approaches could and should be contemplated. COVID-19 with its ghastly impacts was unthinkable before December 2019. If over 90 percent of airplanes can be grounded, if extensive human activities can be suspended under lockdowns, though involuntari-

ly, it is also possible to take a path of active (not passive) individual, collective, and systemic changes to meet the challenges of climate collapse.

In China, the orientation for “ecological civilization,” which is an excellent orientation, has been proposed for some years. But if the hard core of developmentalism and modernization continues to be the guiding principle, China will continue to be challenged by social injustice and environmental devastation. China’s poverty alleviation efforts eliminating absolute poverty are laudable, but relative poverty and social polarization will continue. Strengthening the people’s resilience in meeting economic and environmental challenges is paramount. The Made in China 2025 (a state planning measure designed to strengthen China’s position in global high-tech manufacturing) and China 2049 (China’s plan to build a modern socialist country – strong, developed, democratic, civilized, and harmonious – by its centenary) schemes need to be adapted within the “ecological civilization” paradigm.

The opportunity is before China and the Chinese people. The following principles and strategies can be contemplated.

First, to have ecology take precedence over economy. That would mean not only having “domestic circulation” precede “external circulation,” but also fostering localization with respect for local specificities and differences. This involves promoting local efforts and mobilizing people on the ground to organize their energies collectively to tackle problems that are a consequence of modernization and development and that trapped them in vicious circles. To reverse current damages, slowdown in development or urbanization is not adequate. There must be strategies for de-growth, deurbanization, and deindustrialization.

Second, to have agriculture take precedence over industry, and certainly over finance. Financialization in today’s world is speculative and parasitic. Production of physical goods under market demand is geared toward feeding insatiable consumerist demands in the center of the capitalist world system, while basic needs of those at the periphery are ignored. The return to the primary sector is to foster small peasantry production and rural regeneration, reviving community bondages and interdependence, returning to a respect for nature.

Third, to have life take precedence over money and profit. Survival and subsistence are becoming a luxury for massive populations on Earth, whereas a minority lives in obscene wealth. Whether it is termed humanism, egalitarianism, socialism, or communism, the struggle against such gross, rampant injustices in the world today must be waged. The majority, subaltern population should be provided with the conditions for a life lived with dignity and spiritual enrichment.

Fourth, to have internationalism take precedence over nationalism. Going for self-sufficiency within national boundaries is complementary to concerted global efforts in tackling the challenges of climate collapse. Sandstorms from the Gobi Desert blow across countries with no respect for national borders. The COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the globe. The radioactive water from Fukushima, carrying tritium and other radioactive materials such as iodine-129, cesium-137, strontium-90, will circulate in not only the Asia-Pacific but in all oceans.

Audacity for imagination, for hope, and for action!

Notes

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It may safely be augured that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis.... It would be a curious spectacle, that of China sending disorder into the Western World.

—KARL MARX, "Revolution in China and in Europe," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 98

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