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How and Why China Tackles the Environmental Issues

In his 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation” in *Psychological Review*, Maslow proposed his theory of the hierarchy of needs. Maslow’s theory states that the hierarchy of human needs has the structure of a pyramid. In such a pyramid from the bottom to the top are physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, need for self-actualization, and over actualization. The development processes of a country, like the hierarchy of needs for a person, is staged. With such a logic, we can analogize a person’s physiological needs to a country making sure that the basic needs of its citizens are met. A person’s safety needs is also analogous to a country being able to defend itself from intruders. Following the same logic, the next stages in a country’s needs, same as a person’s esteem needs, would be making sure that the “not-so-necessary” needs such as solving the environmental issues are met and that the country itself is respected internationally.

To understand why the government is taking initiatives in reducing pollution, we first need to understand where the pollutants come from in the first place. The post civil war China quickly adapted the Soviet model and became industrialized after the “156 Soviet-Assisted Projects”. The industrialization of the post war republic was one of the key reasons for China to become “the world’s factory” in the post-Mao era. With nearly 1 billion comparatively well educated cheap laborers and a huge potential consumer market, China became the place of manufacturing, especially for the industries with high pollution, such as the dye industry, mining, and chemical manufacturing. While becoming “the world’s factory” did contribute to China’s entry to the WTO in 2001 and its rapid economic growth in the next decades, it also left behind highly polluted cities. There was a period of time when cities all around China were covered in haze all year long, and the stereotype of China transitioned from being the “sick man of East Asia ” to a highly polluted state.

Although a lot of issues in China will not be addressed without the government stepping in, public opinions and media exposure also became a major pushing force for China’s environmental issues. Unlike political issues or corruptions, environmental issues are something the citizens are able to experience in everyday life. Annie Malcolm and Rachelle Reichert also claims in their “Talking Climate Change through Art and China” that although “artists have an important role to play in raising social consciousness”, there are issues such as Tiananmen, Taiwan, Xinjiang that are forbidden as well as ones such as “children’s rights or recycling” that

are totally uncontroversial (Malcolm and Reichert 2019). An example of the public pushing for change would be the lead pollution in Shanghai from an aluminum acid battery manufacturer. When the residents in the area found that their children had excessive lead in their blood, they started suspecting the local battery factory. Then the media stepped in and after investigation, they exposed that the factory was dumping the waste illegally, which resulted in the shutdown of the manufacturers (QQ News 2011).

In “Breathing in the City: Beijing and the Architecture of Air”, Zee also describes the pollution Beijing was facing in the first half of 2010s. Beijing, as the capital, would normally enjoy all the good resources and favorable policies as the government is trying to construct its capital as a perfect city. However, solving the dire situation of pollution in China cannot be waited any longer when canned clean air became a luxury that Chen Guangbiao was selling. The article also describes the pressurized dome constructed over a private school’s outdoor field so that the children can play outside without being “polluted” (Zee 2015). Chinese people have long been regarded as the group that is able to stand extreme conditions. However, this time it seems that the most enduring ethnicity can not stand it anymore. A Chinese user called *ppip* on *Zhihu*, the Chinese version of Quora, emphasizes in his response to the question “Where Would the Environmental Pollution in China Go?” on *Zhihu*:

“环境污染，和饥荒、战乱一样，必将推动社会变革的出现。有被代理的需要，就会有代理人出现。信息的传播体系、民间利益的代理组织，甚至于环境污染有关的金融保险、法律保护，都会逐渐成长，反过来会推动这个国家的政治体制改革”

“(The issue of) environmental pollution, like (the issues of) famine and war, will definitely push for the appearance of social changes. If there is a need to be represented, there would be someone appearing in order to represent. (Following this model) the systems in which information spreads, the non-governmental interest agencies, even insurances and law protections related to environmental pollution, will gradually grow. (Those factors) will also push for changes in this country’s political system (and policies).” (ppip 2016)

In the United States, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 in which she complained not being able to hear birds chirping in her backyard could be considered as one of the major pushing forces for the foundation of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970; in China, it is also a signal for change when breathing and living without being poisoned became a luxury. Those events also marked the start of the “treatment” stage in China’s “Treatment after Pollution” plan of development, which was also applied by various industrialized western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

In Chinese politics, each major leader could be considered as a stage of development throughout modern Chinese history. For example, Mao’s era is the time of industrialization and

defending the country from foreign interference, while Deng's era emphasized on rapid development and integration into the world economy. When Xi's time finally comes, it seems that this would be the era for upgrading of the industrial structure and pushing for more changes such as balancing urban and rural development as well as environmental conservation. (Hu 2012)

Therefore, it is not surprising that only 2 years after Xi Jinping became the leader, he started addressing environmental issues as part of the upgrade of the industrial structures. When Xi became the provincial Party Committee Secretary (which was de facto the governor) in Zhejiang, he proposed his theory of *Lu Shui Qing Shan Jiu Shi Jin Shan Yin Shan*, or "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" (CCDI 2020). This theory was mentioned again in the "Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Accelerating the Ecological Civilization Construction" from 2015 (CCPCC and the State Council 2015). As a recap of the progresses led by the 18th National Congress in 2017, it was also mentioned in "Report at the Nineteenth National Congress Meeting of the Communist Party of China.":

“坚持人与自然和谐共生。建设生态文明是中华民族永续发展的千年大计。必须树立和践行绿水青山就是金山银山的理念，坚持节约资源和保护环境的基本国策，像对待生命一样对待生态环境，统筹山水林田湖草系统治理，实行最严格的生态环境保护制度，形成绿色发展方式和生活方式，坚定走生产发展、生活富裕、生态良好的文明发展道路，建设美丽中国，为人民创造良好生产生活环境，为全球生态安全作出贡献。”

“Ensuring harmony between human and nature: Building an ecological civilization is vital to sustain the Chinese nation's development. We must realize that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and act on this understanding, implement our fundamental national policy of conserving resources and protecting the environment, and cherish the environment as we cherish our own lives. We will adopt a holistic approach to conserving our mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, and grasslands, implement the strictest possible systems for environmental protection, and develop eco-friendly growth models and ways of life. We must pursue a model of sustainable development featuring increased production, higher living standards, and healthy ecosystems. We must continue the Beautiful China initiative to create good working and living environments for our people and play our part in ensuring global ecological security.” (Xi 2017)

Therefore, the next “five year's plan” proposed in 2015 emphasizes a lot of reforms on the supply-side. In the past, there were plenty of industries that were over-supplied while creating pollution, such as the iron and steel manufacturing conglomerates in Northern China. There was even a joke related to the over-supplying steel from state-owned factories, saying that the top 3 steel-producing regions are China, Hebei province excluding Tangshan, and the city of Tangshan excluding the concealed production, while the concealed steel production by Tangshan is ranked the 9th place worldwide (Youzili 2020). Therefore, the industrial upgrading in China

became necessary: for transforming into a country with more technology-related fields and eliminating the over-competitive nature in the more basic industries. Therefore, the Chinese government starts to use environmental protection as an excuse to shut down thousands of “outdated” factories in “outdated” industries. As a governmental document in 2016 from the State Council describes, the local governments should “ [strengthen] hard constraints on the environment and promote the elimination of backward and excess capacity” as well as “Implement environmental governance tasks and promote the development of environmental protection industry” (Ministry of Ecology and Environment. 2016).

After years of reform, the environmental issues in China’s major cities have been significantly improved. It is reported that by the end of 2019, Beijing had significant improvements on its environment with more than 70 requirements ranging from air quality to waste dumping being satisfied (Leng and Chen. 2019). Surprisingly, China’s campaign towards environmental conservation also gained international recognition, especially after the withdrawal of the United States from initiatives such as the 2015 Paris Agreement. As Matt Peterson mentions in his article “China’s New Environmental Story”, “China decided to step up” after the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement. He also implies that the international appraisal is more of a byproduct China did not expect, as the initial goal of the government addressing environmental issues was both to “allow officials to show alignment with their citizens, enhancing their political legitimacy.” and to “help the economic transformation in China.” (Peterson 2018). At the same time, while China is becoming more and more internationally relevant, showing the efforts in protecting the environment can allow China to receive praise as an environmental leader, especially when the United States, who was the super power and world leader in almost all initiatives, is promoting isolationism. It is also noticeable that a lot of efforts China has put in for environmental protection are being ignored by the western media or simply not reported, which is one of the reasons the stereotype of China being a highly polluted country still exists. For example, a lot of Chinese netizens are unsatisfied with Greta Thunberg, who became famous after her speech in the United Nation. In his response to the question of “What Do You Think Of Greta Thunberg”, nhqf criticized that:

“一群在库布齐沙漠工作了几十年的中国人，在他们的努力下，库布齐沙漠面积的三分之一已经成为绿洲，他们没有去联合国，反倒叫一个没有做出任何贡献，又看谁不顺眼的16岁女孩儿去，这是什么道理？”

“A group of Chinese people has been working in Kubuqi Desert for decades, under their effort, one thirds of the area in Kubuqi has transformed to an oasis. (It is ridiculous that) they did not go to the United Nation, (to make a speech, while) the United Nation asked a 16-year-old girl who made absolutely zero contributions and hates everyone she sees. What nonsense is that?” (nhgf. 2019)

Being angry towards the unequal attention from other parts of the world is a common attitude on the Chinese internet. Therefore while China has been long regarded as the “world’s factory”, perhaps the Chinese government is seeing this time period as a great opportunity to both transform the manufacturing structure domestically and increase international fame.

Obviously, the “Pollution before Treatment” model China applied over the last 4 decades is not the ideal one. However, it is a necessary process every industrialized country has to go through. It is surprising to see how the Chinese government is able to transform the environment in merely 5 years. However, currently the system that both the government and the public are using is not perfect. It is also noticeable that the current state of environmental conservation in China is not comparable to those in the developed countries. While it looks like there are still a lot of existing problems with China’s environmental protection, only time can tell how it would be in the future.

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