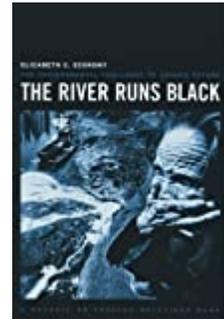




**Elizabeth C. Economy.** *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. xiii + 337 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8978-5.



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## A Presentist Account of China's Environmental Crisis

Elizabeth Economy's new work on the Chinese environment is insightful, provided that readers skip the first half, concentrate on the second, and recognize all the while that it is based almost entirely on English-language secondary sources. The opening chapters alternate between, at best, an apocalyptic enumeration of China's precipitous descent into an ecological abyss, and at worst, a recapitulation of many of the most threadbare tropes about Chinese culture and politics. The second half, in contrast, provides a far more grounded and insightful picture of environmentalism in contemporary China, including an overview of the key challenges faced by the Communist state, the infrastructural organization of China's environmental agencies, and the role of local populations in shaping the future of the country.

While I do not wish to spend much time on the first half of the book, it seems necessary to provide a few examples of why, in my opinion, readers are best served by skipping certain sections of Economy's work entirely. In the chapter titled "A Legacy of Exploitation," Economy mines the fakebook of classical Sinology, humming along to all the standard tunes of Chinese exceptionalism. In

explaining how China arrived at its current level of environmental degradation, all the greatest hits are there: China's failure to formulate a transparent system of law and political accountability; its failure to develop a tradition of scientific rationality, owing to (as usual) the Confucian stranglehold of independent inquiry and its obsession with doctrinal orthodoxy; and the list goes on. In each of these cases, scholarship of the last three decades has called into serious question these very assumptions, and in some cases laid waste to them entirely.

Conceptually, the first half of the book is equally thin. Economy takes the highly modern discursive notions of "environment," "environmentalism," and its various permutations, and projects them into a distant past where they do not belong. In an anachronistic account of China's philosophical and religious traditions, Economy haphazardly paraphrases secondary literature in an attempt to ground her otherwise presentist account of the People's Republic of China in a broader context. In this analysis, the Confucian discourse on environmentalism is summarized in three pages, Taoism and Neoconfucianism in one each, Legalism in three paragraphs, and Bud-

dhism in five sentences. Indeed, the section does so little justice to what Economy calls the “philosophical underpinnings” of China’s current environmental crisis that it would have been far better had the author simply left it out.

In sharp contrast to the first half of the book, the second half does a commendable job of illuminating certain key issues within Chinese environmentalism, many of which are non-obvious. First, one of the primary challenges to environmental protection in China has been the devolution of political and economic authority to the localities, ironically the very same phenomenon which has been heralded by many China observers as the engine of the country’s economic growth and political liberalization. Second, Economy does a wonderful job of moving beyond self-evident challenges facing Chinese environmentalism to explore some of the less apparent factors. For example, instead of focusing solely on China’s lack of key environmental protection laws, she also examines important legal loopholes that Chinese business owners have exploited to circumvent legislation that does ex-

ist. Likewise, in addition to examining the usual suspects of environmental degradation (development-driven Chinese industrialists and unconcerned officials), Economy examines cases of environmental damage which were the result, not of individual indifference, but of infrastructural incapacity. Namely, she examines cases in which environmental degradation was allowed to proceed due to the lack of a local-level information networks that, had they existed, would have allowed citizens to report environmental problems to relevant government agencies.

Overall, for readers who are most concerned with understanding the broader historical context and significance of contemporary challenges to the Chinese environment, their time and energy would be better spent elsewhere—Mark Elvin’s *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (2004) immediately comes to mind. For those whose concerns are focused strictly on the present, however, and for those who are in need of a rapid introduction to the key institutions, players, and issues within Chinese environmentalism, the new work by Economy is well worth a quick read.

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