BLUE SKIES OVER BEIJING

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By Sam Geall

The sky was high and blue during the Olympics," Chinese state media reported a worker in Beijing as saying after the Games. "It's so much better than those foggy days." His words came amid protests by residents in the east of the capital, who feared potential dioxin pollution at the city's biggest landfill and waste incineration facility.

The Olympic cleanup of Beijing did reduce the smog. China's official air pollution index—a scale from 0 to 500, with a score under 100 considered a "blue sky day"—recorded levels as low as 17 on August 15; all the more impressive since the index hit 500 as recently as December 2007. The measures were localized and temporary: there was a partial vehicle ban that moved some of the city's three million cars off the roads, as well as closures of building sites and some large regional polluters. Few nationwide policies were introduced that could have reduced air pollution on a larger scale or in the longer term. But the measures did provide a glimpse of what might be. According to the World Bank, 20 of the world's 30 most polluted cities are in China.[1] The Olympics presented urban areas with a model from which to learn, and perhaps an opportunity to begin to avoid the "pollute first, clean up later" paradigm, which has seen environmental concerns pushed down the agenda in favor of unchecked growth.

A scavenger picks up plastic bags at an open dump on April 2, 2008, in Chongqing Municipality. Photo credit: China Photos/GETTY IMAGES

Pre-Olympics measures raised all-important environmental awareness and allowed Beijing's residents to see a visible improvement in their quality of life. When the Games ended and traffic restrictions were due to end, a lively media debate ensued about the future of the city. Some Olympics traffic measures were retained in the capital, and Shanghai is now introducing a partial version of the policy, facts that can be regarded as victories for the environmentalists who publicly argued their case.

There was also disquiet in provinces neighboring the capital when it dawned that the closing ceremony meant a return to business-as-usual in Beijing's quest to secure its water supply. Before the Olympics, demonstrations by farmers, critical media reports, and statements in the National People's Congress met the decision to rush the completion of a 307-kilometre canal diverting water from arid Hebei Province, which displaced a reported 30,000 people.[2] Hebei has one of the lowest levels of per capita water resources in China; state media reported half a million people suffered from drinking water shortages in 2007.[3] In the end, the canal was not used during the Games, a decision some have linked to the fear of negative publicity. But soon after the Olympics, officials said that Beijing had started diverting "emergency water" to ease the city's "grim water situation," a myopic policy that Chinese environmentalist Dai Qing has likened to "quenching thirst by drinking poison."

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Assessing China's post-Olympic environmental scene means putting it in the context of the country's recent ecological and economic history. Since 1980 China has had the highest sustained rate of economic growth in the world. BBC China editor Shirong Chen puts it well when he says: "China is going through the past few industrial revolutions all in one go." Industrialization, of course, has never been clean.

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Despite the huge reduction in poverty this has brought, the environmental costs have been staggering. A serious water pollution incident occurs once every two to three days in China, with more than 70 percent of the country's waterways polluted,[4] and contaminated groundwater in 90 percent of the country's cities.[5] In 2007, the *Financial Times*, citing World Bank figures that were never released due to alleged political interference, reported that air and water pollution caused 750,000 premature deaths annually in China.[6] A study by researchers at Harvard University found that for every *yuan* of coal in China, there was a cost of 0.58 *yuan* in damages to human health.[7]

A homeless man washes his feet in sewage water in Xiangfan, Hubei Province on March 14, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

Just less than 60 years ago, unusual weather conditions resulted in the deaths of several thousand people in London from pollution-related respiratory diseases over the course of a few weeks. And today, the West must also claim responsibility for some of China's pollution. Studies have shown goods produced in China for export to consumers in rich countries account for around one-quarter to one-third of the country's greenhouse-gas emissions.[8] Put another way, the MP3 player in your pocket is a little piece of China's industrial revolution.

This is a familiar argument in China. Many subscribe to the "pollution haven hypothesis": that dirty industries in rich countries have relocated to China in order to escape tighter regulations at home. However, many Chinese environmentalists also note that this process is mirrored within China, where the country's poor suffer disproportionately from the effects of polluting industries that are seen as largely benefiting the nation's increasingly wealthy middle classes.

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This unfair distribution of risk, as elsewhere in the world, extends to the potential impacts of climate change. It is rarely noted that China, with its export-oriented economy built up along the eastern seaboard, has the world's largest population living in low elevation coastal zones. Disasters are already located disproportionately in these low-lying areas around the world, and climate change will increase this risk. In particular, rising sea levels will increase the risk of floods, and stronger tropical storms can lead to flooding and urban disasters. As in New Orleans in 2005, it would likely be the poor in China's cities that would be affected most in similarly catastrophic circumstances.

And yet there will be no solution to climate change without China taking action. If the country has not yet overtaken the United States as the world's biggest

greenhouse-gas polluter, it soon will. As world markets go into "meltdown," the metaphors used to describe the current financial chaos echo the ecological crisis that imperils the planet. Andrew Simms, policy director at the New Economics Foundation, points to the cry commonly heard from financiers that some banks are just "too big to fail." As Simms said at a recent conference in London: "There's really one system which is too big to fail, and that's a climate which is conducive to human civilization."[9]

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Bailing out the climate—and averting the ecological meltdown—will mean the major players need a better grasp of China's political and social scene. There are some common myths that need exposing. First among these is the idea that the government is unconcerned about pollution or climate change. On the contrary, a significant element of the central government is very worried about the environment. Some important laws are on the books. China has high fuel efficiency standards and aggressive targets for energy efficiency and renewables. In 2007, China released a national plan for climate change, the first by a developing country, according to official sources.[10]

However, the other common myth (particularly prevalent among environmentalists) is that China's central government can implement its policies easily across the country. As the saying goes: heaven is high, and the emperor far away. Economic growth is still the only yardstick consistently applied to evaluate local officials' political performance in China, and as long as that is the case, there is little incentive to adopt more sustainable approaches to growth at the local level. In many cases, an alliance of money and unchecked local power has been allowed to override environmental concerns in China. And it is this dangerous alliance that often seems to be behind the many cases of wrongful imprisonment, intimidation and violence against environmental activists and advocates in the country.

Workers clean waste along the banks of the Yangtze River near the Three Gorges Dam in Yichang, Hubei Province on November 2, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

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A lack of official transparency has harmed the increasing number of activists who want to hold local governments to account precisely by upholding central government directives. An open government information law that came into effect in May 2008 may help to improve access to environmental information in China, as civil society groups make requests for water and air pollution data in their areas.[11] But the law exempts from disclosure information in the broadly defined category of "state secrets" (which include secrets concerning "economic and social development"), considerably weakening the initiative and providing a potential avenue for bad practice.

Which brings us back to the Olympics cleanup, since a worrying lack of transparency was also displayed by the capital's local government in the run-up to the Olympics. A paper by the Beijing-based pollution researcher Steven Andrews, published in *Environmental Research Letters*, suggests the city government met its target of 246 "blue sky days" in 2007 by manipulating data about particulate pollution. The improvement in air quality,

he said, was partly due to the city's environmental protection bureau moving air quality monitoring stations to areas further outside Beijing that were less polluted.[12]

2009—a year of not a few important and sensitive political anniversaries in China—will provide an opportunity for a newly constructive set of international relationships to be forged on the issue of climate change, as nations meet in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark, for UN-led talks that will determine the shape of a new treaty to succeed the Kyoto Protocol in 2012.

The West cannot use China as an excuse for its own inaction. Shared global issues will only be tackled with real, constructive engagement. And this means improving our understanding of the problems that China faces. Supporting collaboration on technology transfer and international, low-carbon development projects should be matched with a clearer focus on enforcement rather than just laws and targets, with support for greater transparency and civil society initiatives, and with backing for public interest laws and the lawyers that defend them. This will help to ensure China does not lose sight of the real legacy of the "Green Games": the great enthusiasm and public participation they produced.

Notes

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