Environmental Governance in China: Weakness and Potential from an Environmental Policy Integration Perspective*

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Abstract

Interest in China’s capacity for environmental governance is growing, in line with its environmental woes and exponential economic growth. Environmental policy efforts have lacked effectiveness, confirming the persistence of a disjuncture between promise and performance. This article contributes to the debate through the analytical lens of Environmental Policy Integration (EPI): a normative concept and governance regime indispensable to sustainable development. It finds that China,

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like most OECD countries, falls short of the concept. Despite encour-
aging recent changes, driven by the Hu-Wen regime, and encapsulated
in the idea of scientific development, the analysis reveals weaknesses
in all three EPI-type responses: normative, organisational and proce-
dural. The disjuncture is confirmed, but drawing on EPI’s normative
perspective, it is suggested that the reasons for this lie as much in the
framing of the promise, as in the performance, or implementation,
itself. Based on this interpretation and on China’s unique extreme char-
acteristics, it is recommended that environmental policy objectives be
given principled priority status, as a condition for effective
governance.

Persisting Disjuncture in Environmental Governance

Since the start of the reforms in 1978, the scale and pace of economic,
social and environmental change in China has attracted attention, admi-
ration and fear in equal measure. Remarkable growth has come at the
expense of the environment, which in turn is taking a heavy toll on
human health, and this is raising questions about the short and long term
benefits of current development policies. China is not only compressing
the six centuries of history that have led to our modern capitalist soci-
eties into a few decades, it is also—and as a result—compressing all
manner of environmental emergencies into one major, evolving, crisis.¹
According to research by the World Bank, the State Environmental
Protection Administration (SEPA) and a team of international experts,
the combined economic costs and human health impacts costs of outdoor
air and water pollution for China’s economy comes to around $US100
billion a year (or about 5.8 per cent of the country’s GDP).² Other esti-
mates range from 3 to 20 per cent, prompting the comment from China’s
President, Hu Jintao, that “[China’s] economic growth is realized at an
excessively high cost of resources and the environment.”³

How has the government responded to the crisis? China has made
progress and taken on bold commitments, which in many ways sound
more far-reaching than those of most of the countries renowned for their
leadership on environment and sustainability. Since the 1990s scholars
and experts have identified significant improvements in environmental
policy and related implementation mechanisms.⁴ Nevertheless, observers
from within and outside China continue to find evidence of what Lieber-
thal calls the “disjuncture between [China’s] promise and its perfor-
manence on environmental issues.”⁵ Although the legal framework could