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THE ENVIRONMENTAL MANDATE OF HEAVEN:
CONFUCIAN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN CHINESE POLICIES

WanChu ChangLiao

APS 650: MAPS Capstone Project

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Abstract

Environmental degradation is a contemporary issue that has gained a lot of attention in recent history for China. The developing country's industrial revolution has led to unprecedented carbon emissions, and despite efforts to curb population growth, China's expanding and aging population has presented the country with numerous challenges. In this essay, I examine China's environmental issues and the People's Republic of China's (PRC) policy decisions through the lens of Confucian role relations. Through this lens, and given the multitude of challenges China is facing, it may be argued that the PRC is acting out its role as the leader and protector (paternal figurehead) of Chinese citizens in earnest. Additionally, my survey of Chinese nationals helps us to better understand the PRC's relationship with its people. Based on this qualitative data, it appears that the people of China believe that the PRC is acting in their best interests and that the PRC's environmental regulations are helping. This study may help foreign investors, government, and non-government organizations better understand the PRC's decision-making and relationship with their responsibilities, which could lead to improved strategy in the Chinese marketplace as well as more favorable negotiations with China.

Keywords: Confucian governance, environmentalism, policymaking, pollution

Introduction

China's swift rise to prominence in global economics and politics has earned it significant attention from the academic community. The extent to which China's entrance into the global economy has dramatically changed global trade in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is comparable to the manner in which China's expanding carbon footprint is impacting the globe today. As scholars and policy-makers in the fields of international politics, global trade, and environmentalism grow increasingly interested in China's decision-making process, a growing body of evidence suggests that the manner in which the government of China perceives itself and its role in the global community might be influenced by Confucianism, which in turn influences its decisions regarding environmental policy. Confucian philosophy regarding role relations serves as a useful lens through which to examine Chinese policy-making, and in particular offers a useful framework for describing the Chinese government's relations with its people and the global community.

It is crucial that organizations and other global actors gain an intimate understanding of China's approach to governance, international diplomacy, and environmental responsibility. Thus, as China's influence expands, it is increasingly important to understand the influence of Confucianism in China's tactics and activities of policy-making, focusing on both internal as well as external factors. Ultimately, this analysis helps us to understand China's reliance on Confucian relational philosophies to help shape the country—from the highest levels of government to those systems in place within smaller communities. Gaining insight into China's practices is imperative in contextualizing how it shapes itself into a powerful nation with

significant influence economic and political influence in the region of the Asia Pacific and, in this era of globalism, throughout the in the world.

Confucian Principles of Governance and Relations: Environmental Practices

Confucian values of responsibility to others may be among the core guiding principles shaping the Chinese government's environmental policies. The Confucian idea of benevolence toward others promotes sacrifice for the betterment of future generations, and this is likely to influence China's environmental policies.¹ This analysis hypothesizes that China's approach to any policy-making activities is influenced by a critical examination of the policies' long term consequences. Furthermore, this may help us better understand the approach of Chinese officials in maintaining their diplomatic roles and relationships. Generally, these officials face pressure from all sides of society, including each corporation's internal department of state affairs and external international interests, all of which are related to political interests and environmental policies.² Analysis of Confucianism's role in Chinese policy-making points out that the Confucian doctrine of "the concentric circle" suggests that each person should begin by perfecting themselves, then seek to perfect the local community, and then expand this pursuit outward toward the world.³

¹ Peter T. Chang, "China's Environmental Crisis: Practical Insights from Chinese Religiosity," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 15, no. 3, January 1, 2011: pp. 247-267, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853511x588644>.

² Elizabeth C Economy, "China's Environmental Challenge: Political, Social and Economic Implications," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 27, 2003, <https://www.cfr.org/report/chinas-environmental-challenge-political-social-and-economic-implications>.

³ Chang, 249.

The idea of CGG is an application of Confucian ideals of harmonious diplomatic relations, education, and human development to global governance.⁴ This application is based on the hypothesis that these Confucian ideals can be extended and expanded from their applications to individuals so that they apply to entities as complex as a nation. Confucian thinkers have pointed out that it has been common for leaders to apply Confucian ideals to governance, and that Confucius himself advised rulers using these same principles.⁵ This suggests that even national governments can organize on a global scale using Confucian principles. The concept of CGG stems from research suggesting that Confucian ideas inform China's "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie*) foreign policy approach.⁶ This idea of CGG means that each nation views itself as a part of a global community and acts as a custodian not only of their own respective fates but each community member's as well.

According to Confucian philosophy, China's role in policy-making for its people may be likened to the role of the father in familial relations, and its role on the global stage may be likened to the role of a diligent member of the community.⁷ This suggests that China, as a significant actor both in terms of its citizens' well-being and that of the global community, has multiple levels of responsibility. Based on the doctrine of concentric circles, China may need to focus on improving its own domestic environmental policies before playing a more significant

⁴ K C P Low and Sik-Liong Ang, "Confucian Ethics, Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility," *SSRN*, February 22, 2013, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2222396.

⁵ Chang, 249.

⁶ Rosita Dellios, "China's Harmonious World (Hexie Shijie) Policy Perspective ..." *Bond University*, January 2009, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46100150_China's_harmonious_world_hexie_shijie_policy_perspective_How_Confucian_values_are_entering_international_society.

⁷ Anh Tuan Nuyen, "Confucian Role-Based Ethics and Strong Environmental Ethics," *Confucian Role-Based Ethics and Strong Environmental Ethics*, November 2011, <https://www.whpress.co.uk/EV/EV2026.html>.

role in the global community.⁸ However, its pursuit of self-improvement may also inspire other nations to strive in the same direction. The Confucian principle of role-based ethics suggests that each entity has a role to play in their community, and the pursuit of fulfilling that role is itself admirable and worthy.⁹ In this way, even by pursuing internal improvements while framing them as an effort to be a responsible community member in the global community, China may help to encourage a global movement toward environmentalism. In addition, the Confucian structure of social relationships that governs China's behavior suggests that each entity has a role to play, and that its obligations to others are shaped by that role.¹⁰ In relation to the global community, China's role is that of a community member, and it therefore stands to reason that within the Confucian ethic China is obligated to control its emissions to a certain extent so that it is a responsible member of the community. This may be seen as problematic, since China produced over 27% "of the world's carbon emissions from fossil fuel" in 2018, which is more than twice as much as even the United States.¹¹ "While limiting pollution in order to be a responsible community member may serve as a meaningful philosophical guideline, it may be complicated by a number of questions." For example, is China responsible for bringing its overall carbon emissions down so that it pollutes less than other nations, or is it a question of carbon emissions per person? International agreements such as the Paris Agreement that present international guidelines and encourage cooperation may help to proactively shape China's engagement with

⁸ Chang, 249.

⁹ Nuyen, 559.

¹⁰ Nuyen, 555-6.

¹¹ Samantha Wong, "China: CO2 Emissions 2019," *Statista*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/239093/co2-emissions-in-china/>.

environmentalism by fully outlining its responsibilities as a member of the international community.

However, in addition to fulfilling its role in the global community, China's environmental policy must likely be shaped by its role as the custodian of its citizens' well-being. China takes on a role similar to that of the father's role in Confucian familial politics, which suggests a number of different obligations.¹² Whereas China may derive one sense of responsibility from its role as a member of the global community, the government's role as a patriarchal figure in terms of its domestic responsibility to its citizens may give a different set of obligations. In this regard, Nuyen notes:

The process of rectifying names, *zhengming*, has two sides. On one side, we are to use a name, such as 'father', 'son', 'ruler' etc., that fits what is named, i.e. a person with certain qualities. On the other side, we are to rectify our selves to fit the name that one bears, or the role that the name specifies. It is the process of learning to recognize and accept one's obligations, and to do what one ought to do as a person named. Someone who is an X must rectify himself or herself to be truthful to the name X. (556)¹³

This means that an official or lawmaker in a Confucian society may feel pressured to live up to their title by being an effective custodian of their citizens.

The Confucian doctrine, when viewed through the lens of environmentalism, may have an immediate impact as each individual is encouraged to focus on improving their own environmental footprint; however, the doctrine also suggests that as one's reach increases, one's responsibility also increases. Following the logic of this doctrine, Chinese officials may also seek to enact beneficial environmental policies in order to demonstrate that they have already improved themselves enough to expand their own circle of influence. Ultimately, enacting

¹² Nuyen, 555-6.

¹³ Nuyen, 556.

forward-thinking environmental policies may actually help Chinese officials demonstrate their own worthiness in regards to their role in the government. By enacting progressive environmental agendas, Chinese officials can demonstrate the principle of benevolence (*jen*) and help to ensure the pollution output of their communities is reduced.

When it comes to creating and enforcing effective environmental policies, part of the PRC's responsibility may be seen to involve maintaining the health and well-being of their citizens. This may be even more important in many regions of China, where air pollution can be not only unhealthy but dangerous to Chinese citizens.¹⁴ This means that when it comes to managing pollution, the Chinese government may be seen to be failing to be truthful to their names as governors, since they are failing in their duty to protect their citizens. On the other hand, it may be understood that the challenge being faced by China's government is monumental. Researchers have observed, for example, that "ambient air pollution has become a leading risk factor in China, affecting in particular the large population living in urban areas. It is noteworthy that the Chinese Government recognized this serious problem and took comprehensive actions to tackle air pollution."¹⁵ Even though China may not be fully succeeding in its efforts to protect its citizens, at least the government is taking action and is attempting to perform its role responsibly.

¹⁴ Peng Yin et al., "The Effect of Air Pollution on Deaths, Disease Burden, and Life Expectancy across China and Its Provinces, 1990–2017: an Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017," *The Lancet Planetary Health*, September 1, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30161-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30161-3/fulltext).

¹⁵ Yin et al., 395.

Environmental Degradation: Economics and Population Growth

While Confucianism has been beneficial in making the Chinese government take initiative, it is not a cure all for the various and complicated problems interconnected with the environment—namely, economic and population growth issues. As a protector and father figure, China has to some extent succeeded in adhering to Confucianism and, at the same time, they have in other ways failed. As a developing country, the issues of economics and pollution sometimes come into conflict. In order to fix the economics, they temporarily ignored the pollution and its ramifications. However, these decisions have led to additional problems for China.

The rapid degradation of China's environment comes at a crucial moment in China's development; it is a nation that, despite its recent economic successes, is still struggling to provide for its large population. China's historic pattern of population growth was an issue of singular interest and concern for scholars a few decades ago, and some models projected an unsustainable growth in urban areas which would lead to problems like overpopulation and pollution.¹⁶ Based on this previous research, it appears that scientists were already modeling the problematic situation developing in China as early as 1996. China's economic boom coincided with a rapidly-deteriorating domestic natural environment, which has negatively impacted the standard of living in mainland China.¹⁷ While the pollution boom may be an unsurprising result of rapid industrial expansion, the scale of China's pollution has taken many scholars and officials

¹⁶ J Shen, N A Spence, "Modelling Urban-Rural Population Growth in China," Environment & Planning A, U.S. National Library of Medicine, August 1996, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12291770>.

¹⁷ Peter Pang, "China's Evolving Environmental Protection Laws," Doing Business in China the Right Way - IPO Pang Xingpu, August 17, 2020, <https://ipopang.com/chinas-evolving-environmental-protection-laws/>.

aback. China's environment has fallen victim to China's rapid economic expansion, leading to an era in which China's air and already-limited water resources are being polluted at an unprecedented rate.¹⁸ This means that in addition to China's limited water-per-capita caused by its large population, now pollution is making these resources even more scarce.

Although China's pollution problem is almost certainly related to its economic and population expansion, researchers are still studying the nature of this relationship. An empirical analysis of Chinese provincial data collected between 1993 and 2002 indicated that China's pollution problem has far less to do with China's role as a "pollution haven," resulting from the liberalization of its international trade, than it does with Chinese manufacturers' decision to manufacture pollution-intensive goods.¹⁹ This means that Chinese manufacturers have opted to produce goods that have a high pollution cost for manufacturing. This could be because pollution-intensive goods also tend to produce higher yields in terms of capital.²⁰ In other words, Chinese manufacturers decided to manufacture goods that would produce more capital, but in exchange the Chinese environment has suffered as a result. It stands to reason that Chinese manufacturers were allowed to produce these pollution-intensive goods because of relatively lax regulations concerning the production of pollution, but the continuation of production of these pollution-intensive goods may have as much to do with the "daunting" expense of re-purposing old manufacturing facilities as it does with manufacturers' continued desire to continue

¹⁸ Vaclav Smil, "The Bad Earth: Environmental Degradation in China," *The Bad Earth*, March 15, 2017, pp. 21-26, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315646534-11>.

¹⁹ Junyi Shen, "Trade Liberalization and Environmental Degradation in China," *Research Gate*, May 22, 2014, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Junyi-Shen-2/publication/24076326_Trade_liberalization_and_environmental_degradation_in_China/links/00b49516df3119bcb_a000000/Trade-liberalization-and-environmental-degradation-in-China.pdf.

²⁰ Shen, 2008.

producing high capital yields.²¹ In this way, it could be argued that by the time Chinese officials realized the massive scale of the environmental problems facing China, Chinese manufacturers were already committed to their path of producing pollution-intensive products with high capital yield. This research is important because it re-frames the problem, suggesting that China was not being used or taken advantage of by the international community, but was instead accepting high-pollution manufacturing to reap the relatively high capital yields of pollution-intensive products.

While Chinese manufacturers accepted pollution-intensive manufacturing with the implied blessing of the Chinese government, this does not necessarily suggest that the PRC was breaching its Confucian role as a protector of China's people since it could be argued that the Chinese government needed to face numerous challenges at the time and did their best to protect some things at the expense of others. In this way, the PRC may have been choosing what it considered the lesser of two evils. In the mid-1990s, the Chinese faced growing pressure to enter the global marketplace in order to provide for a quickly-growing population.²² This significant pressure may have inspired China to act swiftly and to prioritize capital growth at the expense of the environment. In order to participate successfully in the global marketplace, China also needed to increase the productivity of its population, which led to the process of industrialization and a massive migration of Chinese from rural to urban areas.²³ This means that to some extent,

²¹ Valerie Sathe Brugeman, Kim Hill, and Joshua Cregger, "Repurposing Former Automotive Manufacturing Sites," November 2011, <http://www.cargroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Repurposing-Former-Automotive-Manufacturing-Sites.pdf>.

²² Johnson D Gale, "Population and Economic Development," *China Economic Review* 10, no. 1 (September 20, 1998), <https://doi.org/http://www3.nccu.edu.tw/~jthuang/Population%20and%20Economic%20Development.pdf>.

²³ Shen, 2008.

the PRC may have temporarily turned a blind eye to the environmental costs of industrialization in order to provide for its growing population. The rapid changes that characterized China's transition from an agrarian to an industrial society led to many systemic inefficiencies, including multiple types of environmental degradation such as that resulting from the rapid construction of water, electricity, and housing infrastructure.²⁴ While it may be appropriate to question the wisdom of China's plan in retrospect, given China's position previous to its entrance into the global economy and industrial revolution, China's vulnerability to environmental degradation might still be considered a necessary, manageable evil. Therefore, China's exposure to its current pollution situation does not invalidate the hypothesis that the PRC is behaving in-line with its Confucian role relation identity as the patriarchal figure for Chinese citizens.

In order to better understand how the PRC may have sought to fulfill its role as a father figure with relation to the people of China, it is important to understand the backdrop of economic hardships that China faced back when China was joining the world economy. Back in December of 2001, China finally joined the World Trade Organization after about 15 years of continuous negotiations.²⁵ This important step was part of a long process of globalizing their economy and bringing their powerful workforce's offerings to the global marketplace. The PRC globalized its economy against the backdrop of economic hardship and reform in China, as the country struggled to feed, cloth, house, and provide fresh water for a rapidly-expanding population, and it experienced an acute need for resources it could not produce domestically.²⁶

²⁴ Johnson, 1999.

²⁵ James Agarwal and Terry Wu, "China's Entry to WTO: Global Marketing Issues, Impact, and Implications for China," *International Marketing Review*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, June 1, 2004, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/02651330410539620/full/html>.

²⁶ James A. Dorn and Xi Wang, *Economic Reform in China: Problems and Prospects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

For example, as China modernized its economy, if it required certain infrastructure construction tools and technologies, it might frequently need to trade for these tools rather than being able to produce them itself. This need drove China to shift from a largely agrarian economy to an industrial economy in order to increase its productivity, and therefore flexibility, as a member of the global marketplace.²⁷ For example, since China could trade what it produced by its manufacturing industry for additional liquid capital, it could apply that capital to develop infrastructure, buy advanced technologies from developed nations, or keep it liquid and spend it in emergency situations. By contrast, the agrarian model that China had been pursuing previously allowed for significantly less flexibility, since the goods produced were in low demand and were frequently isolated across China's vast rural countryside, which was also characterized by weak infrastructural development.²⁸ The industrial economy with which China replaced its former agrarian economy allowed China far more options, but those options ultimately came at a price. In China's case the price of its new economy was rampant environmental degradation, which ended up putting its people at risk.

China's Role as Protector: A Survey

Methodology

To gain insight into the Chinese public's perspective on the PRC's job protecting its citizens from pollution, a survey approach was adopted. English was the language used to develop the survey questionnaire to avoid any complications relating to translation. This proved effective since the individuals I selected to send the survey to all spoke English as a second

²⁷ Dorn, Xi, & Wang (1990).

²⁸ Huang, P. *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*. (Stanford University Press, 1985).

language. Due to the respondents' language skills, the written survey question responses to the question ("Please briefly describe (300 words or less) how the Chinese government's efforts and/or pollution have impacted your local area.") were occasionally challenging or at least ambiguous to interpret. This means that the selection of responses was narrowed considerably. However, the remaining responses still lend insight into Chinese citizens' perspective regarding the job the PRC is doing at managing pollution.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through a written questionnaire delivered to 26 of my friends and relatives via e-mail. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in **Appendix A**. The respondents were told they had 7 days to reply, and the survey was sent on 4/20/2021. By the designated end point of the study, 9 of the 26 potential respondents had replied. One of the respondents indicated "no" to the Chinese residency question "Are you currently a resident of China?" While this was probably due to their temporary residence in the United States for school, their results were not included in this survey. This meant that there were 8 qualified respondents to the survey overall. Due to the extremely limited sample of this survey, the question relating to gender was dismissed since it was impossible to speculate regarding any gender-related trends in responses. Overall, 7 men and 1 woman who resided in China partook in this survey.

Risk of Bias

Admittedly, there is a significant risk that since the surveyed individuals are my friends and relatives, and since I would know how each person answered, this may have influenced their answers. This potential bias must be recognized and treated as a significant limitation of the study. Furthermore, the fact that the survey selection examined a group of individuals based on their relation to me means there are numerous other implicit biases in the data, since my friends are by no means a group of randomly selected individuals. With that said, one of the valuable contributions of this preliminary survey may be to gain some insight into the issues at hand—and give a starting point for others to design more extensive, superior experiments in the future that lead to interesting, more comprehensive results.

Limited, Qualitative Data

The survey question and sample size provide a good general starting point, invokes a certain pathos, and gives us some understanding of the perspective of Chinese citizens regarding the Chinese government's performance in its battle against pollution.

Survey Findings

Discussion

Regarding the question “Please rate the quality of the Chinese Government's agenda to protect the environment . . . in your local area.” of the 8 qualified respondents, 3 responded “Unsatisfactory,” 4 responded “Satisfactory,” and 1 responded “Excellent.” Meanwhile, for the second question, 6 of the respondents selected “Satisfactory” and 2 selected “Excellent.” This data suggests the possibility that some Chinese citizens believe that the Chinese government is

making valuable efforts across mainland China while the respondents' respective locales are not receiving enough attention from the government. There are a number of possible implications of this data, especially when it is informed by the individual written responses of the respondents.

Since all 8 of the respondents are from the Shanghai province, due to the biased nature of the data sample, the most obvious possibility is that despite the government's best efforts, the Shanghai province remains disproportionately polluted. This hypothesis is reinforced by Respondent A's (names were not associated with the data gathered by this survey) reply to the written question: "Overall, government has been good in stopping the pollutions in rural area . . . [but] pollution in [Shanghai] city where I live is still bad." Respondent B notes that "In Shanghai when you look up in the grey pollution it is hard to notice if the sky is [a] little brighter. Especially when one day is better and the next day is just bad again." While this can be interpreted a number of different ways, one way to interpret this comment is that the pollution can be so bad in Shanghai that it is hard to notice the difference created by the government's efforts. In future research efforts, a larger sample of respondents from more regions of China would be necessary to rule out the hypothesis that Shanghai is simply a particularly polluted region of China. This hypothesis is further strengthened by existing research on the extreme and dangerous air pollution levels in Shanghai.²⁹ This means that Shanghai is indeed a particularly polluted region, and it makes sense that the respondents to this survey might be disappointed with their government's efforts locally even while appreciating that pollution in other regions in rural China has been somewhat mitigated. While the limitations of the data collected via this

²⁹ Li, Jia, Sarath K Guttikunda, Gregory R Carmichael, David G Streets, Young-Soo Chang, and Virginia Fung. "Quantifying the Human Health Benefits of Curbing Air Pollution in Shanghai." *Journal of Environmental Management* 70, no. 1 (2004): 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2003.10.007>.²⁹ *People's Republic of China*.

survey make the hypothesis that Shanghai is a particularly polluted region difficult to rule out, the data also suggests a number of other possibilities as well.

Another hypothesis for the discrepancy between citizens' rating of Chinese performance locally and their performance nationally is that it could point to successful propaganda efforts by the Chinese government to reassure citizens that efforts are being made to mitigate pollution, although those efforts may not be seen by its citizens. While China's strict control of media is well-documented, as well as its use of propaganda to promote everything from national unity³⁰ to Confucian ideologies,³¹ recent evidence suggests that China has scaled back some of its efforts to control the media on the subject of pollution in order to appease public outrage and mitigate the growing traction that alternative domestic news sources like blogs have gained from the outrage over pollution.³² While the Chinese government's efforts to use propaganda to tout environmentalism to its citizens have been documented,³³ there has been little research designated to study China's use of media to publicize its own efforts to clean up pollution.

This is another interesting area for potential future research, especially since publicizing its own efforts toward mitigating pollution would hypothetically be in line with China's prospective efforts to play the role of a paternal figure in Confucian role relations. If the Chinese

³⁰ Stefan Landsberger, "Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization," 2020, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315481258>.

³¹ John Dotson, "The Confucian Revival in the Propaganda Narratives of the ...," January 2011, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266603016_The_Confucian_Revival_in_the_Propaganda_Narratives_of_the_Chinese_Government.

³² Edward Wong, "China Lets Media Report on Air Pollution Crisis," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/15/world/asia/china-allows-media-to-report-alarming-air-pollution-crisis.html>.

³³ Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro, "China Goes Green: Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet," *Wiley.com*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/China+Goes+Green%3A+Coercive+Environmentalism+for+a+Troubled+Planet-p-9781509543113>.

government is indeed publicizing its own efforts to mitigate pollution, it may also explain why respondents to this survey rated China's efforts across mainland China more favorably than its efforts in the respondents' locales. Respondent B's reply to the written question may lend some insight into this hypothesis, and in part recommended this hypothesis via his response: "I think the government is trying their best or at least they say so. It is tough to see the difference [in Shanghai] they make, but everyone know the efforts [are being made]." This idea that *"everyone" knows the efforts are being made even though the results are difficult to see* recommends the idea that there is some sort of publicity effort being made in China to let the public know that the government is working to help fix the pollution problem(s). It also stands to reason that it would be difficult to observe the difference being made by mitigation efforts, since as Respondent B observed "it is hard to notice if the sky is [a] little brighter." Based on the findings of this study, China's potential campaign to recommend their own environmental efforts to their citizens is one area of further research which may yield extremely interesting results.

Another interesting finding of this survey is that one of the respondents believed that the Chinese government's agenda was of "Excellent" quality both in their local area and across mainland China. This respondent, Respondent C, emphasized the efforts that the government was making in their written reply: "I know pollution is major problem in the mainland and especially in the cities but the Chinese government is making serious efforts to fix it. When I hear about the idea of China building green energies with solar and wind power I feel a sense of pride to be Chinese." Respondent C is an outlier from this sample since they are the only one who thought that the government's agenda in their local area was "Excellent." Furthermore, they were one of only two respondents to indicate that they felt that the government's agenda across

mainland China was “excellent.” Due to the small sample size, it is difficult to know whether this individual is truly an outlier or whether there are many more Chinese citizens who are pleased with the government’s efforts to reduce pollution. Respondent C also cited the difficulty of the task at hand, saying that “pollution is a major problem in the mainland and especially in the cities,” as well as “I know many people are complaining but compare to before when the air pollution in the city was so bad I can see the Chinese government [is] making major improvements.” These statements at once recognize the significance of the challenge China is facing while simultaneously contradicting what Respondent B said when they said “In Shanghai when you look up in the grey pollution it is hard to notice if the sky is [a] little brighter. Especially when one day is better and the next day is just bad again.” It would be interesting to see whether there is an age difference between these two respondents, since Respondent C seems to be noticing trends that Respondent B is unaware of. If Respondent C is significantly older than Respondent B, for example, then perhaps they really have noticed an improvement.

Environmental Protections

When the PRC may have historically behaved in a manner consistent with their role as the patriarchal figure in Chinese society, its current agenda yields further insights into the manner in which China perceives its own role. While the government has done an excellent job of creating strong policies, they need to carry out these policies more effectively to fulfill their role.

In creating these policies, the PRC is fulfilling its Confucian role as a fatherly protector

of the country. This allows them to take responsibility for some of the shortcomings that occurred due to rapid population growth and economic challenges. According to one law firm who advises clients seeking to do business internationally, “The Environmental Protection Law is the basic legislation for environmental protection in China.”³⁴ This means that most of China’s laws and regulations relate to this main piece of legislation. Additionally, as of early 2018, the Environmental Protection Tax Law of China divided taxable pollution into four categories: “air pollution, water pollution, solid wastes, and noise.”³⁵ As one vestige of China’s environmental law, the imposition of a tax on various types of pollution is an interesting nuance. This suggests that the PRC still sees individual instances of pollution as having a quantifiable cost, and that it is willing to trade what are essentially polluting rights to those persons and organizations willing to pay for them. Legal commentators have noted that this pollution taxation is made somewhat more significant by the fact that “there is no double taxation principle in China.”³⁶ This means that an organization could be taxed multiple times by different agencies for the same instance or instances of pollution. Furthermore, as is the case in many other governments including the United States, China’s enforcement of environmental policies is carried out by urban, provincial, and national enforcement authorities who enforce environmental policies with actions ranging from fines to a suspension of business operations to “administrative detention.”³⁷ This means that an organization could be prosecuted and taxed or otherwise punished multiple times for the same

³⁴ Shen Jinzhong, “Environmental Law in China,” *Lexology*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=9f730a4a-45eb-4bc3-a71d-b870b0f33863>.

³⁵ Jiaqi Zhang, “2 New Environmental Laws to Go into Effect in 2018,” *China.org.cn*, January 1, 2018, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2018-01/01/content_50176729.htm.

³⁶ *Winners Law Firm*.

³⁷ Qing Wu et al., “Environmental Law and Practice in China: Overview,” *Practical Law UK Signon*, Practical Law, May 1, 2020, <https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/3-503-4201?contextData=%28sc.Default%29>.

instance of pollution by each of numerous government organizations with overlapping jurisdictions. The taxation of pollution may also demonstrate a certain brand of utilitarianism whereby the PRC feels able to leverage the funds from these pollution taxes to significantly benefit the population or offset the pollution. Alternatively, these taxes could serve as an incremental measure to gradually discourage organizations from polluting, which is a tactic that has demonstrated promising results on consumers, and may be considered an especially effective tactic if more dramatic measures would be prohibitively expensive.³⁸ This means that although pollution regulations such as China's pollution tax may seem to be only half-measures, they could also represent innovative strategies for gradually moving the nation away from the high-pollution, high capital yield trade off and toward a more environmentally friendly economy. If the economics of the high-pollution, high capital yield equation begin to appear less favorable, especially amid rising public pressure from a Chinese public that is suffering from pollution, then Chinese organizations may find significant reasons to shift their strategy toward more sustainable manufacturing. In this regard, the policies allow for protection of the country's environment and people, which is in alignment with Confucian principles.

Besides the environmental regulations and pollution taxes, the Chinese government has also set up a system of compensation for institutions that have caused measurable environmental damage in China. Legal review of Chinese laws outlining modes of compensation finds that in addition to taxation, Chinese judicial authorities may also charge individuals or organizations for

³⁸ Yu Wei and Ruizhu Han. "The Impact of Pollution Taxation on Competitive Green Product Choice Strategies." *Computers & Industrial Engineering*. Pergamon, August 9, 2019. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S036083521930470X>.

damaging the environment.³⁹ This is important because while taxation suggests that certain types of pollution may be acceptable, these fines outline pollution behaviors—or at least outcomes—that are not considered acceptable in China. According to one law firm,

... the scope of compensation for ecological environmental damage includes reasonable expenses such as removal of pollution, restoration of ecological environment, loss of service functions during restoration of ecological environment, [and] losses caused by permanent damage to ecological environmental functions.⁴⁰

This further suggests that the PRC is making the effort to quantify the impact of various forms of unacceptable, damaging pollution. Based on legal reports, one of the most interesting recent legal developments in China is the 2015 Nanping case, wherein Chinese courts confirmed the ability of non-government environmental advocacy groups to take legal action in the interest of protecting the Chinese public.⁴¹ This means that not only government organizations, but also non-government entities have the PRC's support in helping to uphold various Chinese environmental policies. The Nanping Case represents the first time Chinese judges have affirmed a non-government organization's ability to file "public interest litigation" against polluters.⁴² This means that NGOs can legally take action on the public's behalf to press charges against individuals or organizations who break pollution regulations. While the charges in this particular case were relatively minor, the fact that it set a precedent for other NGOs to take similar action against other polluters sends a powerful message regarding China's environmental agenda.

³⁹ *Winners Law Firm.*

⁴⁰ *Winners Law Firm.*

⁴¹ Yanmei Lin and Jack Tuholske, "Green NGOs Win China's First Environmental Public Interest Litigation: The Nanping Case," *Environmental Law Reporter*, November 30, 2015, <https://elr.info/news-analysis/45/11102/green-ngos-win-china%E2%80%99s-first-environmental-public-interest-litigation-nanping-case>.

⁴² Lin & Tuholske, p. 1.

In addition to the innovative laws the PRC is employing in its role as the patriarch of China, an examination of what the PRC is saying about its own efforts suggests that the Chinese government continues to take not only its custodial role seriously, but its role as a member of the international community as well. According to the PRC's 2020 Earth Day press release to the United Nations, "China is a developing country. Now it is confronted with the dual task of developing the economy and protecting the environment. Proceeding from its national conditions, China has, in the process of promoting its overall modernization program, made environmental protection one of its basic national policies."⁴³ Here, China first refers to the difficulty of its own situation, calling to mind the challenges it has faced in order to modernize its expansive population. Next, it points to its legal efforts to ensure that consideration of the environment is enfranchised within its own legislation. Next, China references its role, saying: "As a member of the international community, China . . . has taken an active part in international environmental affairs, striven to promote international cooperation in the field of environmental protection, and earnestly fulfilled its international obligations."⁴⁴ In addition to commenting on their commitment to international environmental affairs, China interestingly goes further to state that they have promoted international cooperation in this regard. This may yield some clues into the manner in which China views themselves and their own role in international politics. This could be important, since in Chinese culture's "relation-centered" world, people or in this case nations are frequently divided into broad categories of rank and proximity.⁴⁵ In this case, China

⁴³ People's Republic of China, "Environmental Protection in China," *Environmental Protection in China*, June 1996, http://www.china-un.ch/eng/dbtyw/zmjg_1/jgzfbps/t176940.htm.

⁴⁴ *People's Republic of China*.

⁴⁵ Anne S Tsui and Jiing-Lih Larry Farh, "Where Guanxi Matters: Relational Demography and Guanxi in the Chinese Context - ANNE S. TSUI, JIING-LIH LARRY FARH, 1997," *SAGE Journals*, January 1997, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0730888497024001005>.

seems to recognize the global community as a neighborhood of sorts and seems to adopt the role of a community leader—at least in terms of its press release. However, this role as community leader in the international community is one that reporters and world leaders alike have questioned in the recent past, as China’s carbon emissions have risen to outstrip those of the United States and European Union combined.⁴⁶ This suggests that China may require further progress before fully growing into the role it has assumed as an international leader in pollution.

Conclusion

China’s swift rise to global prominence both economically and politically has inspired many businesses, governments, and NGOs to closely examine China’s policy-making decisions regarding the environment. In this increasingly-global community, China’s environmental impact in terms of pollution may be understood as a global challenge rather than just a Chinese challenge, while a tightening of governmental regulations and controls concerning pollution may affect people and businesses from every corner of the world. China’s policy-making decisions regarding the environment have evolved from when they first entered the global business community, transitioning from a capital-centric model of manufacturing to a more balanced model which seeks to mitigate environmental damages while still preserving profits. The Chinese government has also created numerous protections and demonstrated some evidence of enforcing these protections, even when NGOs rather than government entities press charges on behalf of the people. From the perspective of Confucian role relations, the Chinese government

⁴⁶ Deborah Lehr. “Is China Still the Global Leader on Climate Change?” *The Diplomat*, October 21, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/is-china-still-the-global-leader-on-climate-change/>.

embodies the paternal role of protector of its citizens, custodian of its domain, and member of the global community. While the Chinese government may have made plenty of mistakes when it comes to environmental degradation, and may continue to do so, my survey indicates that from the perspective of its citizens, the government's efforts to curb pollution have not ended.

Furthermore, residents of China seem to be largely receptive to the government's message to invest in green energy and reduce carbon emissions as part of the Paris agreement. The PRC has a difficult path ahead of it and will need to balance various concerns and interests: bolstered economic production, limited resources-per-capita, mass urbanization of its population, and a growing need for pollution controls and environmental protections. However, where the citizens of China are concerned, it seems that their government is taking steps to ensure a future wherein, day by day, "the sky is [a] little brighter."

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Appendix A

Are you currently a resident of China? Yes/No

If so, in what Province do you live?

What is your gender? male/female/nonbinary

1. Please rate the quality of the Chinese Government's agenda to protect the environment...

A. in your local area. Excellent/Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory/Poor

B. across mainland China. Excellent/Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory/Poor

2. Please briefly describe (300 words or less) how the Chinese government's efforts and/or pollution have impacted your local area.