China’s Green Path:  
The Way  
To Sustainable Development and  
The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games
Abstract

This thesis evaluates the claim that the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were a “Green Olympics”. Beijing was under intense international pressure to address the desperate state of the environment in preparation for the Games. Along with various human rights issues, China’s environmental crisis was a primary source of the criticism that Beijing endured in the western media in 2008. The Chinese media reporting gave the opposite evaluation, that the Green Olympics were a great success.

Part One investigates prevailing theories of sustainable development in China and reconciles them into a single model, called the Green Path. Despite the polemics in the media, Chinese activists and officials tend to agree with Western experts about the challenges that China faces on the path to sustainable development, and the actions necessary to overcome them. The consensus is that green technology and investment alone is not enough to rescue China from environmental crisis. Without actual political, economic, and cultural transformation, China is destined to continue its environmentally destructive behavior until the tipping point.

Part Two compares the concrete actions taken in preparation for the Green Olympics to the criteria of the Green Path. The issue of water supply is used to exemplify the approach to sustainability that Beijing took and the shortcomings of the existing environmental evaluations of the Games. Although the campaigns and major projects were the most obvious green actions, there were also some substantive structural reforms as described in the Green Path theory.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics were an important expedient of the positive transformation to the Green Path for China. By drawing international attention to the environmental practices of the capital city, the Olympics forced China to take measurable action within a given time-frame. Most of this action was in relative compliance with the Green Path agreed upon by the experts. It is impossible, however, to declare China or the Olympics sustainable or unsustainable. Sustainability is ultimately not a destination, but in the process itself. The 2008 Olympic Games prove that China is working hard to realize the way.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Problem of Oversimplification</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Sustainable Development Theory in China</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Economy: Western Critic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan Yue: Advocate of Reform from Within</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast of Emphasis</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma Jun: Chinese Activist</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Green Path</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Green Olympics</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Challenge: Water</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffered Environmental Regulation and Enforcement</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Participation and the Green Olympics</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency of Information</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Governmental Organizations</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Reform</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Economic Accounting and Evaluation</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability is a Political Term</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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“The scientific view of development seeks a comprehensive and sustainable change of politics, economics, society, culture, and theory – a transformation of civilization”  
-Pan Yue, Vice Minister, China Ministry of Environmental Protection

Introduction

It is a huge task to evaluate the environmental sustainability of a sporting event, and near impossible to evaluate the sustainability of a nation’s growth. To do so, one must first define sustainability and establish criteria, then collect data and compare the actuality to the criteria. Despite the complexity of such a task, politicians, journalists, and scholars often use the adjectives “sustainable” or “unsustainable” to praise or criticize the level of harm done to the environment in an activity. Without the proper degree of evidence, this oversimplification only adds to the ambiguity of the meaning of sustainable development and makes it harder to evaluate environmental performance.

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and GreenPeace both produced environmental reviews of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Both reports fell far short of a satisfactory conclusion that could reconcile the conflicting media reports on the so-called “Green Olympics”. Both reports failed to complete step one: define sustainability and collect independent data. Without a clearly defined standard by which to judge, the evaluations are unfounded.

By compiling and reconciling the theory of the United Nations Development Program, western scholars, Chinese activists and government officials, Part One of this report will outline a broad operational definition of the way to environmental sustainability in China, referred to throughout as
The Green Path. Part Two attempts to evaluate the environmental measures adopted in Beijing for the Olympic Games in relation to this standard. The issue of water supply is presented as a specific example to illuminate some of the concrete achievements of the Green Olympics preparatory process, and also the shortcomings of the UNEP evaluation. Lacking a team of engineers and reams of data, the ultimate declaration of sustainability/unsustainability is beyond the scope of this report, even if we limit the evaluation to just Beijing’s water supply. Instead, this report attempts to add richness to the discussion of the environmental achievements of the Green Olympics in the context of China’s path to sustainable development.

**The Problem of Oversimplification**

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were widely considered to be China’s coming-of-age as a global superpower. Never before has the country been under such intense scrutiny and international pressure. Great effort was made to ensure that the perfect message was conveyed to hundreds of millions of global viewers. The 2008 Olympics were meant to be a symbol of China’s incredible progress in all dimensions. The massive scale of the building projects leading up to the games and the ceremonies that commemorated them were a testament to China’s economic progress and political power. The games were officially dubbed the “Green Olympics,” and were meant to demonstrate that development in China has become relatively sustainable as well.

The Green Olympics were declared a success more than a year before the opening ceremony. The Chinese media expounded the great strides made in Beijing in the last eight years. They emphasized that all seven environmental promises made during the bidding process in 2001 had already been fulfilled by the end of 2007\(^1\). New green technologies were flaunted and the number of “Blue Sky Days” was announced with pride. Chinese officials and the Chinese media all lauded the

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Action Plan of the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG), the fulfillment of the bid promises, and execution of positive and measurable change that would have a lasting effect on Beijing and also China as a whole. Four days before the opening ceremony, Premier Wen Jiabao made this bold statement: “The Games are very short, but what is left behind will last. I, together with [Beijing party chief] Liu Qi, promise that Beijing will stay as clean as now after the Olympics.”

Not everyone was convinced. Western media's reporting on the environment in Beijing was mostly muckraking expose. The Age of Melbourne, Australia went so far as to name the Green Olympics “to a considerable extent a mirage, cloaking environmental disaster”. Environmental crisis was added to the list of reasons to boycott or otherwise undermine the Beijing Olympics. As part of a ten-part series on China for the New York Times, Jim Yardley writes “Greening Beijing has not meant slowing it down. Officials have also encouraged an astonishing urbanization boom that has made environmental gains seem modest, if not illusory... Beijing is like an athlete trying to get into shape by walking on a treadmill yet eating double-cheeseburgers at the same time.” Perhaps the most damning report on the Olympics came from Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal on behalf of the nonpartisan think-tank Council on Foreign Relations. They published an article in the summer 2008 issue of Foreign Affairs entitled “China's Olympic Nightmare,” which named the failure to sufficiently address the environmental degradation in Beijing and China as a whole as a justification for the criticism of the Beijing Olympics in the western media.

The United Nations Environment Program sent a delegation in 2007 to “paint an independent picture of Beijing’s efforts to incorporate the principles of environmental sustainability into” the Green Olympics. That objective, however, is immediately preceded by the disclaimer “Notwithstanding the

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near total reliance on information provided by the Chinese authorities…”5 It is no wonder that the western media was unconvinced by this final assessment:

There is no doubt that, with less than one year to go before the 2008 Olympics, Beijing is on track to deliver on its environmental promises... this review is able to conclude that considerable effort has gone into fulfilling the letter and the spirit of the promise by the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG) to deliver a 'Green Olympics’.6

In addition to the reliance on government-supplied statistics, the other shortcoming of the UNEP report was that it failed to contextualize the assessment by defining “environmental sustainability” and how it should look in China. Without a clear standard by which to judge, UNEP’s approval of the Green Olympics is empty.

Part I: Sustainable Development Theory in China

In 2002, the United Nations Development Program published a comprehensive analysis of China's environmental situation and the measures needed to get the country on a sustainable path of development. In contrast to the 2007 UNEP report, the 2002 UNDP report is thorough and clear. It does not rely entirely on government data and does issue a concrete and integrated plan as to how China may work towards the ideal of sustainable development. This report proposes the standard which the UNEP report inexplicably fails to reference. It gets to the heart of the challenge that China faces in its response to environmental degradation (italics added for emphasis):

A substantial part of Chinese society, notably leaders at provincial levels and below, and industry managers, still favor the “get-rich-fast – clean-up-later” approach. Also, when tough choices need to be made, it may remain easier to sacrifice the long-term environment in favor of short-term economic or political gains... So, a crucial gap exists between theory and practice, and herein lies the key uncertainty as to how the economic growth model will affect China's sustainability in the future.7

This excerpt identifies one of the two primary ideological obstacles to sustainable development in China. That is the perception that the economy must be prioritized over the environment in all short-term decision-making. This misconception is especially widespread in local government and businesses, and is often supported by the incentives provided by the political and economic structure. The other main obstacle is explained later in the UNDP report: “the public continues to view environmental protection as the government's responsibility,”8 which exonerates them from responsibility and encourages the local officials and industry managers to act without fear

8 UNDP, 49.
of repercussion. This deferral of responsibility begins to explain the root cause of the “crucial gap between theory and practice”. At the central government level there are many officials who fully support UNDP’s plan for political, economic, and cultural reform for environmental sustainability. They must reform the political and economic structure to allow for ideological reform if the “crucial gap” that the UNDP report describes is to be bridged.

Elizabeth Economy: Western Critic

One of the strongest and most articulate critics of China's environmental protection efforts is Elizabeth Economy, senior fellow and Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. She published a book in 2004 called *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*. Her grim assessment of China’s environmental crisis pulls no punches:

China's leaders face a daunting task. With one-quarter of the world's population, centuries of grand-scale campaigns to transform the natural environment for man's benefit, intensive and unfettered economic development, and, most recently, its entry into the global economy, China has laid waste to its resources. The results are evident everywhere. Water scarcity is an increasingly prevalent problem. Over one-quarter of China's land is now desert. China has lost twice as much forested land over the centuries as it now possesses. And air quality in many major cities ranks among the worst in the world. Of equal, if not greater, concern than the immediate environmental costs of China's economic development practices, however, are the mounting social, political, and economic problems that this clash between development and environment has engendered.\(^9\)

Economy justifiably declares China's extravagant growth of the last two decades unsustainable. She

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agrees with the UNDP report in identifying the structural defects that are at the source of this crisis; “Beijing's message to local officials continues to be that economic growth cannot be sacrificed to environmental protection – that the two objectives must go hand in hand.” ¹⁰ She also argues that the market reforms that have encouraged this incredible growth must be mirrored by a market-based approach to environmental protection. Rather than continuing to pursue massive, expensive engineering projects and top-down campaigns, there must be more fundamental reforms of the “soft infrastructure”¹¹ of the systems that perpetuate this destructive behavior.

According to Economy, an environmentally sustainable soft infrastructure requires three elements of civil society to take an active role: the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the judicial system. A free and independent media is necessary as a conduit for transparent information to keep politicians and businesses accountable to the public. NGOs are necessary to aid the under-funded and under-staffed SEPA and train skilled and passionate activists. Rule of law is necessary to enforce the policy and provide citizens with an avenue to demand their rights to clean water and air without fear of persecution. Economy deems this reform impossible under the current Chinese political system, which is “authoritarian, decentralized, endemicly corrupt”.¹² Effective environmental protection is impossible in China without “revolutionary bottom-up political and economic reform.”¹³

Economy is also quite clear about why there might be resistance to the kind of reform that she envisions:

This particular set of Chinese leaders is wary of a color revolution stemming from

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¹³ Economy, "Great Leap Backwards?".
environmental unrest and activism. They try to maintain a strict watch on the activities of activists, routinely investigate their sources of funding, and are vigilant regarding any possible linkages between pushes for environmental change and a push for broader political reform.  

Although environmental degradation is itself a source of public unrest, the Chinese central leadership is reluctant to loosen its grip on the channels of public participation necessary to ameliorate the destruction because they are afraid that these very sectors of society will be breeding grounds for political activism as well. Transparent information could potentially be a source of social unrest as citizens are motivated to take a proactive approach to addressing the rapidly degrading environment in their region. NGOs are potential sources of anti-government organization and mobilization. Legal reform is a potential forum for advocates of democracy to wrest some authority from the government.

The government is self-preserving at all costs, even at the expense of the health of the land which they govern. For this reason, Economy believes nothing short of political and economic overhaul will reverse the destruction of the environment in China. In her most optimistic scenario at the end of *A River Runs Black*, she predicts nation-wide presidential elections in China in 2013.  

The only other scenarios she presents both lead to accelerated environmental destruction, economic stagnation, and violent unrest or natural catastrophe resulting in complete meltdown. She revised this unforgiving pessimism in an interview two days prior to the start of the Olympic Games:

> So I think that over time we are going to see the evolution – a serious evolution, a significant evolution in China's political system, and my hope is that it will come via somebody within the central government, within the politburo, who will say 'We recognize the time has come,' a reformer who will pick up on the signals from down

14 Economy, "Answers from Elizabeth Economy".
15 Economy, *River Runs Black*, 266.
below, so that you don't get a more violent kind of push for change.16

Because the central government values self-preservation above all else, Economy hopes that the growing social unrest in response to environmental destruction will encourage flexibility from within.

**Pan Yue: Advocate of Reform from Within**

Pan Yue (潘岳) is a vice-minister in the newly upgraded Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP, formerly State Environmental Protection Agency, or SEPA). He is noted for his unconventional practice of frequently publishing papers in the international media on a variety of topics from political philosophy to the grave environmental situation in which China finds itself. He writes elegantly in realistic and optimistic language. He has risen to the top of the Chinese bureaucracy based on his family connections and his passionate yet practical approach to environmental protection. He is also the only upper-level official in Beijing who speaks so frankly about the state of the environment in China. In an interview with Der Spiegel in 2005, Pan discussed the grim situation: “Of course I am pleased with the success of China's economy. But at the same time I am worried. We are using too many raw materials to sustain this growth... This miracle will end soon because the environment can no longer keep pace.”17

Pan blames unrestrained economic growth for the environmental crisis in China, just as Economy, Yardley and the UNDP have. He elaborates on the ideology that is responsible:

[Fanatics for economic growth] still play a leading role – for now. For them, the gross domestic product is the only yardstick by which to gauge the government's performance. But this attitude entails two further mistakes. First, we are convinced that a prospering economy automatically goes hand in hand with political stability. I think that's a major blunder.... Second, we assume that economic growth will give us the

16 Economy and Segal, “China's Olympic Nightmare: Interview”.
financial resources to cope with the crises surrounding China's environment, raw materials, and population growth. But there won't be enough money, and we are simply running out of time.\(^{18}\)

These quotes illustrate that not all of the central leadership is naïve about the harmful effects of prioritizing economic growth at the expense of the environment. Pan has a deep understanding of the fact that harm done to the environment is harm done to the future of the Chinese people, not a mere side-effect of economic development. Pan admits that there are some mistaken priorities in the central government, but also finds a larger evil to blame.

In another interview - this time in Chinese (and translated into English for *China Dialogue*)– Pan was asked about the cause of the global environmental crisis, and he answered “The fundamental cause is the capitalist system. The environmental crisis has become a new means of transferring the economic crisis... Developed countries account for 15% of the world's population, yet use over 85% of its resources... [constituting] a form of environmental colonialism.”\(^{19}\) Pan argues that although there certainly are structural flaws to be dealt with, China has been asked to shoulder an inordinate burden as the world's manufacturing center. Furthermore, the idea that stability can only be achieved by continuously accelerating economic development is derived directly from Western capitalist ideology and is directly responsible for China’s current unrestrained growth. The burden of dirty industry that has been outsourced from developed nations, combined with the lion's share of world population and limited natural resources make China's challenge exceptionally daunting. For these reasons, “Traditional western civilization is not an option. China is a socialist country and cannot engage in environmental colonialism, nor act as a hegemony, so it must move towards a new type of

\(^{18}\) Pan Yue, "The Chinese Miracle will end Soon".
China's path to sustainable development does not follow the lead of the capitalist democracies of the developed countries. China must lead the way with its own unique system that Pan calls “Ecological Civilization”.

“What do we mean by the phrase “Green China”? We mean a China that is sustainable, democratic, fair, harmonious, and socialist.” The answer to China's systemic problems in addressing the environmental crisis must be addressed by transformation to Pan's theoretical Ecological Civilization which “obtains material and spiritual wealth by following the objective principle of the harmonious development of humankind, nature and society.” Pan’s most radical ideas hint at a society beyond economic hegemony: “Instead of aiming for the highest possible levels of production and consumption, we should be aiming to improve quality of life and levels of happiness. Instead of being merely a way of earning money, labor should be a creative activity.” Ecological Civilization is a utopia - a philosopher’s dream - but it emphasizes that The Green Path requires fundamental reform, not just more investment and better technology.

Pan uses the language of democracy frequently in describing Ecological Civilization in his essays and interviews, and he refers to the obligation of the government to respect and protect the rights of the public to participate in environmental protection. Pan lists the areas in which the public is needed to participate in addressing the crisis: free and transparent information, environmental litigation, and cooperation with NGOs. These are the exact areas Elizabeth Economy emphasized as sectors badly in need of reform in China. He also calls for a structural reform to address the ideological misconceptions that lead to environmental destruction; “the state still has no systematic policy.

20 Pan Yue, “The Rich Consume and the poor suffer the pollution”
22 Pan Yue, “Scientific concept of development and ecological civilization” People's Daily Online 13 Mar. 2007
23 Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”
framework on the issue of the economy's confrontation with the environment, and has not developed ways of thinking or cultural theories on the issue. There have not been any fundamental changes...”

Pan does not, however, share Economy's view that the reform needed in China must be so radically western as to have American-style elections in five years. “The environment is a problem for all industrial societies, and capitalism and socialism both need to find solutions. This is an issue that transcends ideology and questions of ‘left and right’.” Fundamental change must take place in the implementation and structure of government, but this does not entail mimicry of the capitalist colonialism of the west. “Our socialist political theory contains within it the core concept of eco-industrial civilization – social justice.”

Pan acknowledges the harsh realities of China’s environmental crisis and the destructive economic, political, and cultural ways that are badly in need of reform. He also has a vision of a green path, similar to that of the UNDP and Economy, but distinctively Chinese and optimistically utopian. He rejects eco-colonialism and unrestrained economic growth and embraces transformation to socialist democracy, beginning with greater freedom of public participation in environmental protection.

**Contrast of Emphasis**

The theoretical disagreements between Economy and Pan are so abstract they are almost inconsequential. The most apparent conflict is on the topic of eco-colonialism. In 2006, Economy wrote a direct response to Pan's accusations of western nations outsourcing their pollution to China. She describes the rhetoric as a “strategy to manage its environmental reputation: launching a political campaign that lays much of the blame for the country's mounting environmental problems squarely on the shoulders of foreigners and, in particular, multinational companies to draw attention away from China's failures” at achieving a Green Olympics. She reminds the readers of billions of dollars of

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25 Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”.
26 Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”
27 Pan Yue, “The Rich Consume and the Poor Suffer the Pollution”.

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environmental aid that westerners have contributed in China, and reiterates the need for China to fix its political and economic structure to allow the media, courts, and NGOs to help regulate environmental destruction. She admits no more than a “kernel of truth” to the accusations.  

Economy certainly is correct that China should focus on the internal structural flaws that make its economic growth so destructive. However, she greatly under-emphasizes the magnitude of the burden that developed nations have placed on China as the factory of the world. John Warburton and Leo Horn, a pair of British environmental economic consultants, published an article in late 2007 that provides a bit of context for comparing the conflicting claims:

With a low-cost production base and high-volume capabilities, China has become the workshop of the world, and it is contributing about one-third of global GDP growth. Export trade rather than domestic consumption is driving China’s growing pollution and resource demands. The average Chinese in fact consumes very little: 48% of Chinese GDP goes to savings. On the other hand, China is the world’s third largest exporter, after the US and Germany. Tellingly, 40% of China’s energy goes into producing exports for western markets. Thus there is a huge global interdependency, in which most parts of the world benefit from the goods China produces at hugely competitive prices, while China is left with the “bads” such as pollution and a depleted environment.

Economy would be justified in chastising Pan Yue as well as activist Ma Jun and others for their “Blame Game” if they were using this strategy as an excuse for inaction. This is not the case. Pan and Ma are among the most outspoken and active leaders of China's response to environmental crisis. The very voices that are speaking out about environmental colonialism are the same ones that are the most responsible for addressing it.

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critical of China's own environmental policy because they are the most concerned. Of course China must deal with its own pollution problem, but the developed nations must recognize the extra burden that China has shouldered and make allowances.

One other area of dispute between Pan and Economy is on the form of government that an ecological civilization can take. Economy seems to be saying that unless China is holding free presidential elections and giving equal representation to its citizens, there will be no possibility for sustainable development. She begins a chapter of her book with a quote from Tang Xiyang, an environmental activist:

Citizens should have the right to shout out that the emperor has no clothes on whether they are right or not. Without democracy there can be no way to approach truth. History without clear conclusions will only repeat its blind and restless past.... I found the chief guarantee of nature protection to be the practice of democracy. Without democracy there can be no everlasting green hills and clear waters. I am convinced that nature conservation is a cause for a whole nation.\(^{30}\)

Pan also uses the language of democracy. He agrees that public participation is the key to effective environmental protection and that political reform is needed to provide that avenue to the citizens of China. He writes “Environmental protection is the ideal field in which to experiment with democracy and law, because it is a fairly apolitical area and one on which it is reasonably easy to reach a consensus.”\(^{31}\) This is a commendable open-mindedness and progressivism from such a high-ranking official in the central government.

Pan also, however, emphasizes that democratic nations often use eco-colonialism and “green barriers” as methods of preserving their “everlasting green hills and clear waters”. This is why he says

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\(^{30}\) Tang Xiyang, quoted by Economy in River Runs Black, 129.

\(^{31}\) Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”.
that China can not follow in the West's footsteps. He combines the values of democracy with the values of socialism, which he says already entails environmental protection as it includes the ideal of social justice.\textsuperscript{32} China's people need both the freedom to condemn the source of pollution, as well as a government that is designed to protect the common interest. In Pan Yue’s vision, this government is a socialist democracy, which integrates the best elements of both systems. In the economic sphere, he advocates a “‘socialist market economy’... [that] integrates the efficiency demanded by the market with the fairness encouraged by socialism.”\textsuperscript{33}

The hybrid political system imagined by Pan is quite optimistic. This is especially exciting considering his position to call for fundamental – even revolutionary – reform from within the upper levels of government. He may be a bit over-idealistic, however. The UNDP report highlights the downside of being caught in between two economic and political systems: “In a sense, China is trapped in between the worst of two worlds: on the one hand a socialist heritage of under-priced natural resources and free right to pollute, and on the other an unrestrained embrace of a market economy where, as Deng Xiaoping famously stated, 'It is glorious to be rich'”\textsuperscript{34} In order to find the utopian Ecological Civilization that Pan imagines, China will need to move towards a best-of-both-worlds scenario rather than the worst-of-both-worlds situation that UNDP describes.

Another serious gripe that Economy has with the Chinese approach to environmental protection is the top-down campaign approach. Pan Yue's published articles make no mention of the wisdom of the campaign approach and large engineering projects that the central government has undertaken such as the Three Gorges Dam or South-North Water Transfer Project. These massive and complex projects are highly criticized by activists and scholars for their cost and inconsistency of long-term performance. They also have many unforeseen consequences, such as increased concentrations of

\textsuperscript{32} Pan Yue, “The rich consume and the Poor suffer the pollution”.  
\textsuperscript{33} Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”.  
\textsuperscript{34} UNDP, p. 71.
water pollutants in water diversions. Even the anticipated side-effects give reason for pause, such as the displacement of many ecosystems and human communities in large dam projects.

Economy outlines the three major short-comings of the campaign mentality and massive engineering projects initiated by the central government:

1. They tend to be highly politically charged with significant investment up front but little follow-through past the stated target of completion;
2. They rarely consult local officials and businesses to engage them in the campaign;
3. They often do not employ the best set of technologies or incentives to change behavior.35

The campaign approach reinforces the idea that large investments from the central government will solve environmental problems without the need for public involvement. It also inadvertently reinforces the perception that environmental protection is a drain on the economy because the projects are so expensive. Economy prefers long-term, market-based, locally-implemented solutions for environmental protection.

**Ma Jun (马军): Chinese Activist**

The campaign approach is one topic that Ma Jun broaches while Pan Yue declines to comment. Ma is arguably the most respected and renowned environmental activist in China. He is the author of a book called *China's Water Crisis* (中国水危机) and founder and director of an NGO called Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs. Ma is critical of the South-North Transfer Project and dubious of the Three Gorges Dam. He writes, “We find that all the engineering projects only increase the ecological damage in the region.”36 He argues that these large-scale projects involve huge investment from the central government and rarely address the root of the problem. These campaigns reinforce the idea that environmental issues are the exclusive responsibility of the government by leaving civil

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society out of the planning and financing process.

Although Pan does not specifically address the campaign approach as such, he does write that "We must produce clear procedures for public participation in decision-making about large environmental projects."[^37] He generally emphasizes that government's responsibility is to create a political environment that makes room for China's public to protect its own right to a clean environment, rather than to issue top-down measures from Beijing. Administrative campaigns are destructive to the goal of public participation that Pan and Economy absolutely agree is the priority in environmental protection in China. Pan implies agreement on the shortcomings of the campaign approach by the omission of this discussion from his theoretical writing.

The UNDP report offers the thought that China should move towards a more market-based approach to environmental protection, and weighs the pros and cons of a campaign strategy. The weaknesses of the campaign approach are in the political process by which the priorities are set, inconsistent implementation and maintenance due to the lack of structural support of policy and market-based approaches, and also in the high cost of such mobilizations. The advantages of campaigns have been the ability to mobilize support from a broad section of society directed towards a specific goal and the capacity to prioritize among the varied and complex challenges that China faces.[^38] The strongest argument on behalf of the campaign approach is in this statement from the UNDP report: “The reform process creates frameworks, foundations and incentives for action. But alone, the reform process is insufficient...” Campaigns have the potential to be the kind of action that the public needs to see to demonstrate that the central government's prioritization of environmental issues is not just empty rhetoric. The environmental crisis in China is urgent enough that massive mobilization campaigns may be justified for manifesting progression in the short-term. However,

[^37]: Pan Yue, "The environment needs public participation".
[^38]: UNDP, 80.
campaigns absolutely must be balanced with the structural reform that Pan and Economy both emphasize in order to be successful in the long-term.

**The Green Path**

Pan Yue and Elizabeth Economy agree overall more fundamentally than they differ. If the two of them were to sit at a table and collaboratively come up with a concrete plan of action for remedying the failures of the Chinese environmental protection efforts, they should easily come to a consensus. They would agree that economic development must be balanced with environmental regulation, and that SEPA must be given more funding and greater power to do its job effectively. Most of all, they would agree that the foremost goal of environmental protection policy should be greater freedom of the courts, media and NGOs in order to open avenues for greater public participation.

The first necessity for public participation is awareness, and so environmental information must be freely available to the public. Ma Jun’s Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs produces a website that lists and maps 2,500 companies guilty of polluting Chinese waterways. In an interview about the role that his website plays in informing the public, he says “In some places, polluting factories and companies are being protected by local governments and officials. The public needs to take its place in water monitoring and management if the situation is to improve. The first step to get the involvement of the public is to inform them.” Several different sources refer to this alliance between local government officials and businesses, both of whom have an overwhelming incentive to expedite production and development as much as possible with little regard for environmental consequences. The public bears the health consequences of pollution and the central government is

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able to foresee the long-term effects, so these factions tend to have aligned interests in favor of environmental protection. The difficulty lies in creating a system where it is in everybody's interest to prevent pollution. Ma Jun published an article articulating the need for the power of the people in environmental protection. He used this example to demonstrate why the people must keep their local officials accountable:

> Is the theory of scientific development enough to help local governments find a balance? A survey by environmental authorities in Shanxi indicates it is not. Asked if a mayor who achieves economic success at the cost of severe pollution should keep his job, 71% of public respondents answered “no”, but 90% of local government officials said “yes.” These officials have their own interests at heart when making environmental decisions, and we cannot rely on them for balanced policy.  

A free media and transparent environmental information is essential to give the public the power to criticize the irresponsible actions of businesses and local government.

The legal system of China must also be reformed so that the policies of the central government are implemented at the local level to benefit the public. UNDP is clear that “awareness and knowledge will not be enough if the political climate is not responsive to public pressures, and if no channels exist for people to voice their views”.  

Alex Wang, Director of the China Environmental Law Project at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Beijing writes that the country’s environmental laws are “broad in coverage,” and “impressive.” The problem is that the judicial system is weak and enforcement and implementation are difficult.  

Pan Yue bemoans his bureau's limited powers of enforcement: “Current laws do not allow severe enough punishment of polluters, and do not give enough power to

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41 Ma Jun, “How Participation can help China's Ailing Environment”.  
42 UNDP, 49.  
environmental departments, with the result that it is cheaper to break the law than observe it."\textsuperscript{44} Part of the reason for this breakdown is that the courts and the local environmental protection bureaus have close ties with local government officials and actually depend on them for funding. The local officials also often have close ties to the local businesses. Officials are judged for promotion based largely on the economic performance of their jurisdiction, which benefits from lax enforcement of pollution regulations. Furthermore, officials often own stakes in the businesses themselves or otherwise have a very personal interest in seeing those businesses turn a profit.\textsuperscript{45} In order to eradicate the corruption that obstructs Beijing’s regulations and policies from nation-wide implementation, it is necessary to establish rule of law. The courts must be independent and fair. They must rule in a consistent way and allow citizens to bring suits against businesses and government if they are responsible for an infringement of the people's rights to a clean environment.

The third area of civil society in desperate need of more freedom to operate is the NGOs. Pan and Economy both stress that MEP (formerly SEPA) is under-funded and under-staffed.\textsuperscript{46} This means that the media must help promote awareness, the courts must facilitate strict enforcement, and the NGOs are badly needed to contribute organization and expertise to aid environmental protection efforts. NGOs are essential to environmental movements in any country, and especially important to involving civil society in environmental protection in China. They lead valuable environmental education efforts, conservation campaigns and lobbying, recycling campaigns, urban renewal projects, as well as environmental research.\textsuperscript{47}

Currently, NGOs in China exist in a delicate space where they are required to register with the government, and therefore are subject to the government for their existence. About 90% do not register

\textsuperscript{44} Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”
\textsuperscript{45} Elizabeth Willmott, “Common Cause”.
\textsuperscript{46} Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China” and Economy, \textit{River Runs Black}.
\textsuperscript{47} Economy, \textit{River Runs Black}, 137.
and therefore must be careful not to draw negative attention for fear of persecution. According to the UNDP report, “The bottom line of this silent agreement is that media and environmental NGOs that operate responsibly and within a scope acceptable to the Chinese government are likely to be granted increasing freedom and access to the political process.” Ironically, NGOs are given political sway by feigning apolitical. They must always be cautious in their activities, whether under the radar or under the government’s direct supervision, and resist any bold calls for political reform. UNDP is clear about how the complete freedom of NGOs must look for effective environmental protection:

    Until NGOs can act independently, with no fear of ad hoc reprisals, they will remain cautious of growing, and will shy away from many issues. They will remain subject to the whims of government administrators, and therefore really an extension of government administration, rather than a positive independent force.

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49 UNDP, 71
50 UNDP, 90
Part II: Green Olympics

As the major project of the last eight years in Beijing, and a moment in the international spotlight for China, preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games provides an excellent basis on which to compare the environmental protection theory with China’s most recent practice. Economy and Segal write that

The process of preparing for the Games is tailor-made to display China's greatest political and economic strengths: the top-down mobilizations of resources, the development and execution of grand-scale campaigns to reform public behavior, and the ability to attract foreign investment to one of the world's brightest new centers of culture and business. Mobilizing massive resources for large infrastructure projects comes easily to China.\(^{51}\)

They are sure to note, however, that these massive mobilizations are useless without the fundamental political and economic reform that will ultimately ensure sustainability in the long-term. UNDP agrees:

The Beijing Olympics represent a showcase opportunity to demonstrate how economic development, modernization, and environmental improvements can all be part of the same sustainable package. But if the greening of the Olympics amounts only to ostentatious construction projects relying on hefty one-time government subsidies and over-utilization of water resources at the expense of surrounding water-scarce areas, then the Olympics would not only fail to be “green” in the sense of “sustainable”, but moreover would cause yet more pressures on the already heavily stressed ecological

\(^{51}\) Economy and Segal “China's Olympic Nightmare?”
This showcase opportunity was never acknowledged by the UNEP report. A comprehensive evaluation of the Olympic Games in terms of this challenge made by the UNDP in 2002 was never accomplished. UNEP naively reproduced government propaganda one year before the Olympics took place, making no reference to this thoughtful interpretation of how the preparation for the Green Olympics should look. A contextualized look at example of water should demonstrate why the statistics don’t tell the entire story.

**Major Challenge: Water**

One of the greatest environmental challenges facing China today is water shortage. This is a particular problem of Beijing and the rest of the dry North, where there has been an extended drought over the last decade. Water scarcity in this region is exacerbated by burgeoning populations and explosive development, which drives demand and simultaneously endangers the supply with pollution and over-extraction. Because water is one of the greatest challenges that Beijing faces in moving towards sustainability, it will provide an excellent area for an initial look at the practices versus propaganda of the “Green Olympics”.

The UNEP report devotes an entire chapter to water issues surrounding the Olympics. One thing the report does well is to emphasize the amount of effort and economic resources put into water management in Beijing in the last decade. The Beijing Water Authority was established in 2004 to manage Beijing's precious supply; 1.28 billion yuan (US$170,547,108) was invested to prevent the pollution of the Guanting Reservoir, Beijing's second largest source of surface water, resulting in an upgrade to Class IV (suitable for industrial use) in 2006; Beijing also made huge investments in wastewater management, constructing 17 new treatment plants between 2000 and 2006, effectively
doubling treatment capacity to 2 million tons per day. Beijing now claims that "In 2006 the rate of wastewater treatment in the Beijing urban area reached 90 per cent [up from 22% in 1998]." The Olympics evidently provided significant impetus for investment and improvements in water infrastructure, although several actions were initiated in 1997, prior to the Olympic bid. The UNEP report indicates that the Olympics accelerated many of the plans by providing a time-line goal.

Although these efforts are laudable, the UNEP report provides no substantive commentary on the direction of the plan. In order to maintain the “accurate, impartial and scientific approach”, in the report, the UNEP comments are clearly separated in shaded boxes from the facts. In the water section, the commentary is limited to three sentences, declaring that there has been “considerable effort” at improvements in water management in Beijing, although there remains “considerable room for improvement”. With its only opportunity to pass judgment, UNEP uses the vapid adjective “considerable” to describe both the achievements and shortcomings of Beijing water policy, ironically failing to give the issue any substantial consideration at all. UNEP neglects to place the Olympic efforts in the larger context of the environmental crisis that Beijing faces and the steps that are being undertaken to address it.

The problem with the UNEP report is that it fails to acknowledge the crisis at all. Many others are eager to do so. Activist Dai Qing provides a scathing review of the water situation in Beijing. She is particularly irked by the “water follies” being constructed for the Olympics, such as the Shunyi “Water Heaven”, the largest fountain in the world at 134 meters. She points out the irony of the fact that this spectacle was built on the dry riverbed of the Chaobai River with groundwater extracted from the deep and rapidly receding water table. This hypocritical extravagance is certainly contrary to the message of Green Olympics.

53 UNEP, 125
The failure to mention the massive and controversial South-North Water Diversion Project that was initiated in 2001 is yet another conspicuous omission in the UNEP report. Four weeks after the closing ceremony of the Olympics, on September 18, the completion of the Shijiazhuang-Beijing emergency water diversion project was announced, which is intended to bring 1 billion cubic meters of water to Beijing by 2010.55 “The Shijiazhuang-Beijing canal is the northern end of the middle route of the South-to-North Water Diversion Project, the most ambitious one of its type China has ever planned in history.”56 The South-to-North Water Diversion Project has three major canal routes, eastern, middle, and western. By the time the western route is completed, in 2050, the complete project will divert around 45 billion cubic meters of water over one thousand kilometers from the Yangzi River in the humid south to the population and agricultural centers of the dry North.57 This project has been criticized by many third parties, who argue that in addition to exorbitant cost (USD$62 billion) and complexity of engineering of the project, it does not address the root reasons for water scarcity.58 Water scarcity in Beijing is a symptom of polluted watersheds, skyrocketing demands, inefficiency and waste. The project goal to simply bring in more water from elsewhere is a treatment of the symptoms rather than the cause of shortage and unsustainable without structural reform to regulate water demand as well.

Ma Jun, Probe International, SEPA, the Beijing Water Bureau and others have endorsed price adjustments for water consumption to reflect the true costs and reign in demand. Currently, consumers only pay 65% of the full cost of the water they consume, and the rest is subsidized by the government.

56 Liang Chao, “Water from Hebei quenches Beijing thirst”.
58 Ma Jun, China’s Water Crisis
to encourage growth. This encourages water waste and a “spiral of growth and expansion that effectively robs the ecosystem of its ability to sustain itself and worsens the ecological degradation.”

The greatest danger of the South-to-North Water Diversion Project is that the cost of it will not be passed on to the consumer, and Beijing's citizens, industry and agriculture will continue to consume greater amounts of water without recognizing the true cost of how it reached their tap.

Close reading of the water section of the Olympic Environmental Review with a bit of contextual knowledge reveals it to be a sugarcoating. UNEP fails to provide an “accurate, impartial and scientific approach” because the statistics are limited to those provided by the Chinese government and are presented without comment. Selectively providing numbers with minimal analysis is not only not impartial, it borders on pandering. The report focuses entirely on infrastructure improvements made in the last ten years, without providing the context of the accompanying rise in demand or any other big-picture issues that give a real indication of the long-term plan for water management in Beijing. UNEP has allowed itself to be a mouthpiece for the Beijing government, and its bland attempt at criticism is impotent. This lack of teeth may be due largely to a sense of diplomacy in the interest of a smooth Olympic games and especially due to the total reliance on information provided by the government.

Despite the shortcomings of the UNEP report and government statistics, it is evident that Beijing has made significant improvements in its water infrastructure in the eight years between bid commitments and the Olympic Games. Whether these improvements will make an enduring impact on the sustainability of Beijing depends on the implementation of soft infrastructure reforms that accompany them, such as full-pricing, effective pollution control, and free NGOs that continue the good work that Ma Jun's pollution reporting website has begun.

**Campaigns**

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59 Probe International, *Beijing's Water Crisis*, p. 34.

60 Ma Jun, *China's Water Crisis*, p. 146.
The most visible aspects of the Green Olympics were the campaigns. Beijing built new wastewater plants, undertook massive afforestation projects, built four new subway lines, retrofitted thousands of buses to run on natural gas, and much more.61 Most interesting were the campaigns that called on citizens to make sacrifices for a greener Beijing. In March 2008, there was a ban instituted across China that prohibited stores from giving away free plastic shopping bags. A small fee is now charged for every bag that the customer requests. The results have been promising, and most consumers are bringing their own re-usable bags to shop, resulting in great petroleum savings.62

Another campaign that directly affected the citizens of Beijing was a traffic control regulation that allowed only half of the city’s cars on the road on any given day, based on an alternating schedule by odd and even license plate numbers. This plan succeeded in reducing congestion and air pollution, but was seen as a burden by car-owners.63 After the Olympics it was re-formatted for permanent implementation as a five-day rotation so that every car would be kept off the roads only once every business week, reducing congestion by 20%.64 A less visible (and less permanent) campaign to address air pollution was the temporary closing of Beijing-area factories. This measure was certainly a quick fix, as most factories were reopened at full capacity immediately after the Games’ end. There were several exceptional cases of more permanent solutions in which factories were relocated altogether in newer, more efficient facilities which were also closer to the port in order to reduce cargo travel distance.65

These campaigns did serve to reduce traffic and air pollution, and secured a water supply for the masses of visitors to the already overcrowded and thirsty city. However, they represent only a temporary, ephemeral greening if they are not accompanied by the “soft infrastructure” reforms that

Pan, Economy, and Ma strive for. It is encouraging that some of the campaigns are continuing beyond
the end of the Olympics, but Premier Wen's promise to maintain a clean Beijing indefinitely will only
hold true if the advice of the experts to make fundamental structural transformations to get on the
Green Path has been heeded.

**Buffered Environmental Regulation and Enforcement**

The Green Path that Pan and Economy describe requires that under-funded and under-staffed
SEPA must be given more authority to enforce the policy of the central government. Encouragingly, in
March, 2008, SEPA was upgraded from a State Commission to a Ministry - the highest level for a
government bureau - equal to the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Science and Technology.
None of the press releases announcing the upgrade mentioned whether the Ministry of Environmental
Protection (MEP) would have a bigger budget or staff than SEPA previously did. Curiously, when
SEPA was elevated to its State Commission status in 1998, the staff was actually cut in half.\footnote{Xie Zhenhua, quoted in Economy, River Runs Black, p. 107} Minister Zhou Shengxian, who retains his position at the top of the bureau in the transition, promised a “law
enforcement system of ‘iron and steel’”\footnote{“Environment chief vows to add muscle” China Daily, 25 Mar. 2008.}. Whether this strong talk will be backed by better
enforcement of environmental regulations in practice remains to be seen. For the meantime, it is still
positively true that the MEP needs the help of effective public participation for effective environmental
protection.

**Public Participation and the Green Olympics**

**Transparency of Information**

The Beijing Organization Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG) issued an “Olympic
Action Plan” that outlined many of the environmental measures that would be undertaken for the

\footnote{Xie Zhenhua, quoted in Economy, River Runs Black, p. 107}
\footnote{“Environment chief vows to add muscle” China Daily, 25 Mar. 2008.}
Green Olympics. “Bringing into full play the role of public supervision” was a primary goal of the Action Plan, including transparent information for all Olympic projects and the establishment of “an offense reporting system... with telephone numbers and email address published for public supervision.” These are commendable practices, but Greenpeace still claimed in its Olympic review that fully transparent information was not achieved in the Green Olympic auditing process. They felt overly dependent on the whims of the government which released only the information that they saw fit to release. This is the major shortcoming of the UNEP and Greenpeace reports. Without independent information, the audits were limited to government-provided statistics that surely did not tell the whole story. An objective and scientific assessment of China's environmental situation will never be possible as long as the central government continues to keep such a tight reign on environmental information that it considers embarrassing.

Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs were consulted in the planning process for the Green Olympics. The Action Plan even includes their expertise and cooperation as an essential component. Two NGO directors were appointed as official environmental advisors, and,

On Dec. 23 [2004], BOCOG held a communication meeting with environmental NGOs on Green Olympics to promote mutual understanding, exchange experiences gained in the environmental education and make joint efforts to raise the environmental awareness of the public. Representatives from 20 environmental NGOs put forward suggestions on issues like how to promote the "Green Olympics"

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concept and improve the overall environment in Beijing.\textsuperscript{70}

Greenpeace calls this involvement “a good first step in setting up the conditions for collaboration between government and civil society... [but] China still has a long ways to go in engaging with civil society as true partners... Currently there is still limited communication between NGO groups and government”.\textsuperscript{71}

The Olympics did seek the expertise and advice of NGOs, but this represented only minor progress towards the complete freedom to do the job to which they are dedicated. The most recent reporting indicates that the freedom from fear of political persecution that UNDP declares essential does not yet exist for Chinese NGOs. Christina Larson of the \textit{Washington Monthly} interviewed Chinese Environmental NGO directors Ma Jun and Zhao Zhong in 2007. Both men deliberately steered clear of politics, making clear that their purpose was to seek enforcement of current regulations and protect the environment in a completely apolitical way.

Larson describes the current relations between environmentalists and government as a “delicate dance” that requires restraint and caution from both parties:\textsuperscript{72}

The government is taking a calculated risk. It is opening space for political participation in the hope of preventing what it sees as an even greater threat: that the country's rapidly deteriorating environment will imperil China's vibrant economy – and perhaps, one day, the party's own hold on power.\textsuperscript{73}

The government warily continues to allow NGOs to take more and more responsibility in


\textsuperscript{71} Greenpeace \textit{China after the Olympics}, p. 41.


\textsuperscript{73} Larson, Christina, “The Green Leap Forward”. 
environmental protection. The legal framework in which they must operate still withholds the kind of freedom that UNDP declares absolutely essential to their effectiveness. Tang Hao reported on May 28, 2008 that only 10% of NGOs are officially registered in China, putting them on a shaky legal foundation that forces them to tread cautiously. “Their lack of legal standing means they must do everything they can to ensure their activities do not draw government attention... if NGOs opt to avoid politics or passively accept political direction, civil society will be unable to develop.” A mutual mistrust between government and NGOs continues to prevent a positive and cooperative relationship that can effectively execute environmental protection efforts. Larson and Greenpeace suggest that the Olympics were an important impetus for a very small bit of progress in this cooperation.

**Legal Reform**

Two major laws were passed during the Olympic planning period that represent important victories for environmental protection. The challenges that these new laws face in interpretation and enforcement, however, serve to highlight the obstacles that still exist in the Chinese legal system on the road to rule of law.

One of the new laws requires all major construction projects to undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before execution. This is an important step in ensuring that the gargantuan engineering projects the Chinese government favor in its response to environmental threats will actually achieve the desired result with minimal environmental side-effects. In this case the Games can be said to have had an historic influence on environmental litigation in China. The first public hearing held under the provisions of this law was a suit in response to the Bai Wang Jia Yuan Residential Development in Beijing which was building two transmission towers in anticipation of the Olympic

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Games. It is encouraging that the law has given the public enough authority to challenge a project as important as an Olympic Games development project.

There is another law, which, coming into effect just before the Olympics, on May 1, 2008, should represent a large degree of progress in legal reform for environmental protection. This law establishes a legal framework for public access to environmental information. This is crucial for public participation in environmental protection, as Economy, Pan, Ma and others have noted. The law has had an immediate effect. NGOs have reported that thousands of new pieces of pollution data have been added to their databases in just the first few months after its implementation. This is great news for civil society’s involvement in environmental protection because with one piece of legislation, all three arenas for public participation can be addressed and improved. If officials can enforce a law regarding environmental information that is released by government to NGOs, it will represent the greatest indication that the best environmental protection theory has been put into practice and China is on its way to closing the gap to which UNDP makes reference.

This point has not quite been reached. Tang Hao reports on several cases in which the government and the courts have not enforced (or adhered to) the letter of the new law:

Participants in the game have not yet understood all the rules. The Chinese public, seeing their aspirations for freedom of information embodied in the regulations, have embraced the concept enthusiastically. The government, however, is used to a different set of rules, where information is traded to gain resources. Therefore information is concealed in order to maintain the government’s own status. The public demand information, but the government is institutionally opposed to providing it, and increases the negative impact

75 Alex Wang, “One Billion Enforcers”.
of refusals. Legal options for resolving such conflicts are unfortunately powerless. Creating a system to implement this legislation requires judicial interpretation, but the courts do not currently understand how to handle such cases and simply reject them. This in turn encourages the government to shirk their responsibilities. At the root of this problem is that the Chinese government has a higher status than the courts, which are funded by local government. Local party committees will have a member responsible for managing judicial issues. This imbalance in status means that the courts are unable to handle disputes over freedom of information between the public and the government.77

Environmental protection continues to meet obstacles at the local government level. Tang emphasizes the necessity for fundamental structural reform, especially in the judicial system. Local governments do not have enough checks and balances to keep them accountable, even with respect to policy issued by the central government. As long as the courts and the Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs) are dependent on local government for funding, these local officials will continue to act unrestrained in the interest of local economic development at the expense of the environment and the long-term economic plan of the central government.

**Green Economic Accounting and Evaluation**

At the root of this problem is an over-reliance on GDP and economic growth as the standard by which local officials are judged for promotion. The “major flaw in our thinking: the belief that economy decides everything”78 has been institutionalized in the party's criteria for evaluation of local officials. One encouraging event occurred in 2006, as SEPA and the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) published the world's first nation-wide Green GDP report which reflects the impact of

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77 Tang Hao, “New Challenges to Environmental Transparency”.
78 Pan Yue, “Green China and Young China”.

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pollution on economic growth in 2004. The report was brief and only attempted to represent a small indication of environmental degradation's true economic effects, but the headline results were still striking: “The preliminary results show that economic loss caused by environmental pollution reaches 511.8 billion yuan (US $64 billion), accounting for 3% of national GDP in 2004 while imputed treatment cost is 287.4 billion yuan (US $36 billion), accounting for 1.8% of national GDP.”

Additionally, if best practices were implemented today to stop the pollution at its source nation-wide, it would require an initial investment of 1,080 billion yuan (US $135 billion), 6.8% of China's GDP. These numbers demonstrate the fallacy of thinking of environmental protection as harmful to economic interests. In the long-term, environmental depletion and degradation will be an increasing drag on the economy via issues that directly affect the general population such as public health and resource depletion.

The Green GDP report represents a great achievement for China; “Pan Yue and Qiu Xiaohua (NBS) stated in conclusion that no other country had ever conducted the complete and comprehensive environmental and economic accounting.” However, Economist Stephen Green emphasizes that this ten page report “only measured the tip of China's environmental iceberg,” even when limiting discussion to the direct effect on the economy. The report only measured the effect of pollution emissions, and not even all kinds of pollution. Water scarcity, soil depletion, desertification, and many other factors were ignored. There were also rumors that upper-level party officials pressured SEPA and NBS to keep their report short and simple rather than evaluate a more comprehensive set of

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82 Green, “China's 'light green' GDP”.

environmental impacts on the economy. Furthermore, the Green GDP has not been published since this first attempt, and there does not seem to be any further development of the project.

Green does, however, acknowledge that it is an important first step for China to quantify the scale of environmental destruction in China and furthermore, “The big attraction for China is that if local government officials were evaluated using this metric, it could provide a powerful incentive for them to protect their local environments.” Although the statistics do not paint an optimistic picture for China's current environmental situation (and don't begin to tell the entire story), the move to begin quantifying and valuing the environment as a standard for evaluation is a crucial step on China's path to sustainable development.

The example of the birth and death of Green GDP accounting in China demonstrates that many officials and bureaus at the highest levels of government recognize the challenges that China faces in protecting its environment and understand the steps that need to be taken. It also demonstrates the resistance that persists in spite of the recognition of a need for fundamental reform. The green GDP report was an attempt to inform the public and dispel the notion that environmentalism and economic growth are opposing forces in which one can be preserved only at the expense of the other. The effort was stifled, however. The report came out incomplete, and a green GDP report has not been undertaken again since the first report was published in 2006.

**Sustainability is a Political Term**

This resistance is reflected in the paranoia that still remains in the Chinese government about releasing environmental information and providing more freedom to the NGOs. Larson posits that many in the central government remain wary of ceding too much information and freedom to NGOs

84 Green “China's 'light green' GDP”.
because these sectors of civil society played large parts in the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1989 (which was also a turbulent year for Beijing). Political stability is always the number one priority for Beijing, and there is a danger that “just the facts” could be used for subversive purposes. Thus, the information that was given to the Chinese media, to UNEP, and to GreenPeace affirmed the success of the Green Olympics in no uncertain terms. With the attention of the world centered on China’s capital, and the pride of the nation at stake, the leaders felt they could not afford to present the full complexity of the difficult path to sustainability.

The polemics in the media reflected that the evaluation of sustainability has been co-opted as a political term. The criteria that are used to evaluate a claim to sustainability reflect the political objectives of the evaluation. The Chinese media reflected the central government’s wish for stability by regurgitating the list of technological achievements of the Green Olympics and declaring them sustainable. The western media reflected the wish that China speed up the process of cleaning up its environmental practices by emphasizing the persisting crisis and declaring the Olympics unsustainable. The softness of the UNEP report was effectively a choosing of sides that failed to resolve the conflict. Its role as an independent, international organization should have been to mediate between the journalists by providing an objective and apolitical analysis which the journalists can then politicize. Instead, it reproduced government statistics without independent research or substantive comment. This was a kowtow to the Chinese version of sustainability that bypassed the opportunity to build on the substantive evaluation that the UNDP initiated in 2002.

The media’s discussion of the Green Olympics was therefore limited to attack and defense. The pressure the Chinese leadership felt to present the perfect message was caused in part by the threat posed by the overly critical western media. The resulting propaganda was defensive and arrogant.

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85 Christina Larson, “The Green Leap Forward”.
What is lost in this kind of polemics is the subtle complexity of the challenges still to be faced and the cooperation needed to address them.
Conclusion

Sustainability need not be a matter of politics. That is evidenced by the congruence of the philosophies of Pan Yue and Elizabeth Economy. Although they disagree at times, the Green Path that emerges from their dialogue is simply a way of long term planning. The political agenda that prioritizes political stability over reform for environmental protection is extremely short-sighted:

There is serious social unrest in China resulting from the government’s failure to protect the environment. Tens of thousands of environmental protests or disputes occur annually… These demonstrations tend to occur when the Chinese people have tried to get recourse through the political system and have failed.86

The government can not address environmental degradation without the help of civil society, yet it withholds the degree of freedom necessary to address the challenge in fear of instability. Ironically, the government’s obstinacy is itself a major source of unrest.

Pan Yue understands the implications of this quandary. He predicts 150 million “environmental refugees” will be displaced by environmental destruction in China. “We are convinced that a prospering economy goes hand-in-hand with political stability. I think that's a major blunder. The faster the economy grows, the more quickly we will run the risk of a political crisis if the political reforms can not keep pace.”87 This realization must sink in throughout the upper levels of government before the necessary structural reform can follow. As Pan Yue says, “My agency has always gone against the grain. In the process there have been conflicts with powerful lobbyist groups and strong local governments. But the people, the media, and the science are behind us.”88 This alliance seems to

86 Elizabeth Economy, “Answers from Elizabeth Economy”.
87 Pan Yue, “China’s Environmental Suicide”.
88 Pan Yue “China's Environmental Suicide: Pan Yue Der Spiegel Interview”
favor the cause of the environment. The realization of this trend by a figure such as Pan at the highest levels of the Chinese political structure indicates that progress is inevitable. Pan Yue inspires great optimism.

The Chinese government has made impressive strides in the last eight years in making the reforms necessary to address the environmental crisis. With the investment and incentive of the Olympics as an expedient, the Chinese leadership has utilized a broad range of approaches, from public behavior campaigns and engineering projects to new accounting methods, legal reform and promotion of the Ministry of Environmental Protection to reflect the goal of sustainability as a priority of the administration. The most fundamental reforms do seem to plod along, but they are definitely taking place. Alex Wang compares the modern legal system in China to that of the United States at the beginning of the 20th century, and emphasizes how rapidly the Chinese system is developing in comparison.89 Tang Hao compares the new information transparency law to the Freedom of Information Act instituted in the United Kingdom which came into effect in 2000, and took as much as five years to be properly enforced.90 Considering the extra burden that China carries as the workshop of the world and developing nation with a population of 1.3 billion and limited resources, the Green Olympic effort deserves our praise.

There are still great ideological obstacles to the realization of the Green Path, however. The greatest of these are the perceptions that environmental destruction is an inconsequential by-product of economic development, and that environmental protection is the exclusive responsibility of government rather than the public. Once the rest of the central leadership has realized the wisdom of the Green Path, the challenge will be to create a political and economic structure that allows this culture to be reformed quickly enough to avoid catastrophe. UNDP describes the proper division of

89 Wang, Alex “One Billion Enforcers”
90 Tang Hao “New Challenges to Environmental Transparency”
responsibilities:

Government will focus on framework and regulation, with some large-scale investments.
Non-government will focus on information collection, monitoring, whistle blowing, and providing an alternative voice. And production units will focus on physical clean-up by introducing new, cleaner processes and building efficient treatment facilities.  

In this respect, there is much to be optimistic about China's approach to environmental protection. Increasing authority has been given MEP to do its job, increasing freedom is gradually being given to the NGOs, the media, and the courts to do their jobs, and China's superior production capacity gives hope for efficient action in response to the demand for greener technology. The central leadership must have the foresight to recognize the severity of the environmental crisis and execute an integrated effort to address it. This effort must include civil society, which means government has an obligation to pass on awareness of the degree of the challenge that the country faces and delegate responsibility. The Chinese people must take up the responsibility and continue to demand accountability from their officials.

China does not have the luxury of resting on its laurels. Although it does seem that China’s overall approach is well-directed, the environment continues its downward spiral, putting stress on ecological systems as well as social stability. The transformation to the Green Path is in a race with the destructive and irreversible effects of economic rampaging. The necessary reforms are being implemented, but when the stakes are this high, there is no such thing as fast enough. For China, the Green Path to sustainability is clear yet challenging, and the consequences of failure are ambiguous yet assuredly grave and imminent.

91 UNDP, 99
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