

## Environmental Issues with Deirdre Chetham (Part 3)

**John Major:** As we have seen in a lot of places around the world, environmental protection is not just species protection, but habitat protection. Is there any sign that you know of that that consciousness has caught on in China?

**Deirdre Chetham:** Not really. There have been a number of habitat preserves set up, which have worked to one degree or another. With every major environmental project now approved, there are supposed to be special areas that are kept intact or where animals are moved or relocated [and] where they will be able to continue to live. [This policy] hasn't worked by and large terribly well, but there have been some places where there are some successes. That usually means that they have taken what had been a very large area of land or water where animals lived in a natural habitat and tried to [re]create it essentially in a nature park in a very limited area. This generally has only been partially successful so far.

**Major:** What about global environmental change, climate change, and global warming? China is certainly one of the largest producers of carbon dioxide in the world.

**Chetham:** Yes, and [of] sulfur dioxide, which produces acid rain. In China, the worst problem is the use of coal. China is the world's largest coal user, many, many times that of any other country in the world. Even now, as they build new dams to produce hydroelectric power, [hydroelectric power] still is only a very small percentage of China's energy sources. This really has been a problem, both within China and, as you say, around the globe, as all these things move from place to place, particularly in the big cities like Beijing or Chongqing, where on November 1<sup>st</sup> the heat is turned on and the city can get so grey that you just simply can't breathe. And it is heavy particulates, in particular, that have the result of a much higher rate of lung cancer there than almost any other place in the world, very, very bad for health, and a major contributor to acid rain, both in China and globally.

**Major:** So you have local and immediate impacts, but also unknown, but possibly very severe, long-term impacts if global warming really does proceed apace.

**Chetham:** That's correct. And they are aware of that, but the problem, again, is what can you do so quickly and at what cost? Again, the idea of shifting to hydroelectric power is, in theory, perhaps a good one if it reduces the [use of] coal, but then you are building these enormous dams and relocating hundreds of thousands—actually, million—of people and destroying all those local habitats. So far, nothing has come without consequences.

**Major:** How do you see the future in terms of resource limitations? I know some economists have proposed that this is really going to put the brakes on China's economy. They are importing petroleum; they have cut down a lot of their forests; they are heavily dependent on coal; [there is] no water in north China. Is this going to really have an impact economically as well as environmentally?

**Chetham:** Well, it might eventually, but I don't see it having one immediately. China is a big country and even though there are some very unpleasant consequences, both for the environment and for the people in certain areas of the country, the economy is still going extremely well and they are still building enormous infrastructure projects to either exploit areas and resources that haven't yet been exploited or to try to move around those that they have. It may make it a more difficult place in some ways, but I don't see that as a problem that is immediate. It will certainly have consequences, for instance, with this south to north water transfer project—that's an immense project. They could dig these enormous canals and yet fail to get water to the north and destroy any number of cities and mountains and create all sorts of other problems along the way. If things go wrong and if enough people revolt against their land being taken

to build dams, there will be a problem. It is hard to predict how big the [problems] will be. But in terms of expecting to have an immediate economic impact, I think it will have some impact.

**Major:** And so one sees these mega-projects as proposed solutions to China's problems – diverting the Yangtze River, maybe diverting the Yenisei River or the Ob River in Siberia. What about 'small is beautiful'? Is there any Daoist solution to the environmental problems?

**Chetham:** Not ones that seem to be catching on. There are certainly a small number of 'green' projects and there are a number of NGOs or small environmental projects and groups that are attempting in different ways either to influence central government or to find alternate sources of energy. In fact, I think they have said that now approximately 5% of new power projects approved by the central government are supposed to use solar energy or some other alternate form of energy. Whether or not that will happen is another question, but there was a provision finally put into the regulations, an approval. But the problem really is the scale. There may be any number of small projects and certainly there are more people [paying attention] as they become more aware of nature groups (at one time the World Wildlife [Fund] group was the only group that people were aware of.) There are all sorts of environmental protection groups and programs that may be very small, but that have an impact and are at least known to city people or intellectuals. But how they influence the government, or whether the small projects they themselves run have an influence, is hard to say; they may in time. Small projects sometimes take on an importance one doesn't expect. But the massive projects that are going on now are clearly what shape the country now, not the small creative ideas.

**Major:** Part of the problem, I guess, is that if you have small savings, they can be overwhelmed very quickly by large increases in resources. For example, every Chinese [person] who buys a car suddenly increases by several times his total energy use.

**Chetham:** That's right. That has caused huge problems with air pollution just in the past decade.

**Major:** And automobile usage is growing by leaps and bounds.

**Chetham:** It's growing enormously. It is totally different than it was a decade ago. And the air quality has decreased noticeably in many of the large cities, as well as just the unpleasantness of getting around because the streets were not designed for cars. It has also resulted, in cities like Beijing, in huge parts of the city being destroyed to build ring roads to get around the city from place to place. As soon as they knock down one swathe of buildings and build a ring road, they need to start another ring road, so they are up to five or six now in Beijing.

**Major:** It is hard to find any farms now in the vicinity of Beijing; that must be a problem too. In aggregate, these projects eat up an awful lot of agricultural land and this in a country where food production is a major concern.

**Chetham:** Well, it is true, in some ways. They estimate, if I recall correctly, that in the past decade about 50 million people have been put off the land; we are talking about a huge number of people who have been moved out of farming, some quite happily. Not many people in China, given the chance to be a farmer or something else, would [give up the] chance to be something else; it [farming in China] is not an easy life. But...it does decrease the produce and the growing land available in the immediate vicinity of the big cities. And, at the same time, the availability of ice cars or railroad transport with cars with ice in them are things that didn't exist in China 15 years ago; there was no long distance transport of vegetables or fruit from north to south; there were no vegetables flown in from Australia except for the top hotels. And that also is something that has all changed; the transportation infrastructure is very different.

**Major:** So China is not as dependent as much on local resources?

**Chetham:** It is not as dependent and, in a lot of cases, the farmers that you are talking about who were displaced were single-family or single-village subsistence farmers. So they were not providing food for the people of Shanghai necessarily, unless they were the profitable farmers living on the outskirts of Shanghai. The people who are farmers in Gansu [Province] or the region of the Three Gorges were essentially growing enough to feed themselves and their families and enough to sell some green beans at the local market place every two weeks. So in that sense, it may affect the local economy or the family economy, but it doesn't affect China's agricultural situation as a whole.

**Major:** Now, a couple of times, you mentioned NGOs and the existence of pressure groups. Do you see an environmental movement existing or growing in China these days?<sup>1</sup>

**Chetham:** It is growing. It certainly exists and it is growing, I would say. There are certainly a dozen or more NGOs which are registered with the government. There are also any number of other ones that are...independent small groups, some of which may have been modeled after international groups or have international links. They do a range of things, from advocating for species protection to cleaning up rivers to various kinds of environmental processes. They often have an impact in drawing attention to these projects. Some are more controversial than others; some work quite well with the local governments; some are in a very adversarial relationship [with the government]. There is a broad spectrum [of such groups] now. They walk a fine line. There are groups in general that the central government is wary of, but they are, at the same time, not nearly so controversial as those that are human rights groups, for instance. An environmental activist is a less delicate type of activist than many in China. Many of these people do, in fact, run into trouble with the authorities, but they are viewed somewhat more benignly than many other kinds of activists.

**Major:** Well, that seems somewhat hopeful then.

**Chetham:** One hopes.

**Major:** What do you see as China's environmental future on a medium scale, say, five to ten years out?

**Chetham:** Well, I think that they are improving some things, while causing a great deal of new problems at the same time. As I mentioned, the environmental legislation is quite good in terms of looking at the problems and writing rules and regulations into law. There is a very sophisticated group of people who have been involved in the Ministry of Education, and there is a very good basis in law. But the problem, again, is on the implementation when you get down to the local county and it is somebody's brother who owns the factory and it is much easier to just work out a private arrangement. Not just in China, even in the [United] States: it is sometimes easier, if you have an older factory, to simply pay the fines rather than try to fix it. So it is not just Chinese corruption; it is often things that exist everywhere: unless you are ready to shut down the whole operation and put everyone out of business and lay everyone off, you have to decide what makes the most sense in terms of where the worst harm is. It is clear for the time being that these major infrastructure projects are going to go on and they are going to cause tremendous environmental damage, which is really irrevocable, plus displace huge numbers of people and change things very greatly. Is that a good thing or a bad thing –

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<sup>1</sup> For more on China's nascent environmental movement, read the testimony to the U.S. Congress of Council on Foreign Relations Fellow and Director of Asian Studies Elizabeth Economy: <http://www.cfr.org/publication.html?id=7770>. This is a very concise but thorough introduction to what kinds of individuals and groups comprise the movement, what kinds of topics they work on, and how they relate to the Chinese government. For more detail, see the articles that Barnard College professor Yang Guobin's articles posted on his website: [http://bc.barnard.columbia.edu/~gyang/Yang\\_ENGOs.pdf](http://bc.barnard.columbia.edu/~gyang/Yang_ENGOs.pdf), published in China Quarterly in 2005, and <http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/greenweb.pdf>, published by the Woodrow Wilson Center.

probably a bad thing, but I would imagine that it [will] go on. They may reduce the coal emissions, so that is a good thing. China's environment, overall, is going to get worse, while, at the same time, there will be an increase in consciousness that it's getting worse, and that that's not a good thing. And [there will be] an increased attempt to find other ways, but I doubt that will keep up with the impact of industry and new projects.

**Major:** It sounds like cautious pessimism.

**Chetham:** Something like that. It is not that the Chinese are saying, "We don't care what happens," or that they are totally unaware of it, but I think that really the industrialization and rapid transport [projects] and other major projects will win out for the foreseeable future.

**Major:** Thank you so much. It has been a pleasure.