China: Xi Jinping’s coal stokes the climate fire


China’s national and provincial post-Covid recovery packages will put three times as much cash into fossil fuel projects as into renewable energy.

China is “focusing its recovery on high-carbon energy and infrastructure, as it did after the 2008-09 global financial crisis”, says Carbon Brief, who analysed the spending plans. Dozens of new coal-fired power stations and climate-trashing coal-to-chemicals plants are among the key items.

The plans make a mockery of Chinese premier Xi Jinping’s claim to the United Nations in September to be aiming for “carbon neutrality before 2060”.

This chasm between words and actions makes Xi a “climate arsonist” still more dangerous than Donald Trump, Richard Smith, a US-based China researcher, writes in a recent article. Smith fears that Xi is “abandoning the transition to renewables”.

In a book published last year, China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse, Smith argues that China’s combination of bureaucratic dictatorship and capitalism has exacerbated its climate impact, and that growth-centred economic policies are incompatible with Xi’s claims to want to protect the natural world.

Smith, a Marxist standpoint, suggests ways that China could “grab the emergency brake” to help forestall climate disasters, and considers prospects for revolutionary change.

In this first part I offer some thoughts on these issues; and in the second part, “China and the ‘left’”, I compare Smith’s approach with others on the “left”.

1. Xi Jinping’s growth-focused policies are leading China, and the world, towards disaster.

Xi, addressing the UN in September last year, said that the 2015 Paris agreement “charts the course for the world to transition to green and low-carbon development”. It should be honoured; China would adopt “more vigorous policies and measures”, aiming to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.

The pledge “raised more questions than it answered”, Smith writes. What did “carbon neutrality” mean? How could China keep increasing emissions for another decade, and throw its “immense coal-fired dreadnought into reverse” to force emissions down to zero?

The reality, Smith argues, is that Xi cannot meet his own climate targets, because the Chinese elite’s priority since Mao Zedong’s day has been to compete with, and protect itself from, the US and other powers by expanding the economy. Xi therefore “has no choice but to maximise the growth of the very industries that are driving China’s emissions off the charts, including coal-fired electricity generation, even if this accelerates global warming, dooming China and the planet too”.

There are two obvious reasons to take Smith’s warnings seriously.

First, Xi’s doublethink is in line with that of UK, European and US Democratic party politicians who swear by the Paris agreement. As UN officials made clear even before the Paris conference, it would not reach a deal sufficient to stave off dangerous climate change. And it did not. Climate Action Tracker monitors the gulf between deeds and words. Xi is a big part of a bigger problem.

Second, Smith is hardly alone in highlighting the yawning chasm between Xi’s words and the ongoing policy support for coal. Mainstream commentators and NGOs do too.

China’s failure to focus post-Covid investments on low-carbon energy indicates “general agreement among the political elites that policy goals other than the low-carbon transition were more important, notably short-term economic growth, employment and social stability”, Philip Andrews-Speed, a researcher of China’s energy system, wrote.

Researchers at Boston University pointed out that state-owned Chinese banks are now the leading international lenders to coal projects elsewhere.

Even Zou Ji, a former state climate official and now president of Energy Foundation China, an NGO, said: “Don’t add new capacity, as that will lock in emissions and create a vicious circle. Once the capacity is there, it will be
used, and prevent reductions in coal-fired power.”
Technological advances “are removing the justifications for building new coal power”, he added.
The authorities are not listening. Carbon emissions from both electricity generation and steel-making have bounced back from the Covid lockdown and are hitting new records.

2. The combination of bureaucratic rule and capitalism has exacerbated the problem.

However much Xi’s empty promises on climate resemble Angela Merkel’s or Boris Johnson’s, the disconnect between word and deed works differently in China.
The state bureaucracy directs the economy through its ownership and control of the banks, and many key economic sectors; the Chinese state retains some powers that other states have ceded to the markets. While Johnson’s inadequate climate targets disappear in a cloud of rhetoric and broken “market mechanisms”, Xi’s get caught in the crossfire between his own economic policy priorities on one hand and bureaucratic interests in China’s provinces and industries on the other.

Take investment in coal production and coal-fired electricity generation. “Distorted incentives favour coal”, Max Dupuy of the Regulatory Incentives Project explains. Provincial and local officials use their authority “to encourage heavy industrial investments in their jurisdictions”.

Under a system that some describe as a “GDP competition” to promote economic growth, officials realise that an easy way to boost their statistics is “to engineer finance for large industrial and infrastructure investment”. This, combined with preferential credit to heavy industry, has “contributed to overinvestment in heavy industry and has been a major part of the story of coal investment in China”.

This dynamic between national and local bureaucrats is discussed in greater detail, and put into international and historical context, in Smith’s book.
The coal-driven boom was fired up in the first place by exporting manufactured goods to rich countries, following China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. More recently, government policy has focused on reproducing bloated, western-style consumer markets in China itself, Smith argues.

In other words, the unique relationship between China’s bureaucratic ruling elite and capitalism, both internationally and within China, has driven forward the biggest coal-based industrial expansion drive in world history. And makes it harder to shift away from it.

Smith’s article identifies three “hypergrowth drivers” in the Chinese elite’s approach: (i) determination to “win the economic and arms race with the US”; (ii) the need to maximise employment; and (iii) the need to maximise consumption and consumerism. Smith writes:

As a state-based communist ruling class in a world dominated by more advanced and powerful capitalist powers, Xi, like Mao and Deng before him, understands that China must “catch up and overtake the US”. That’s the only guarantee that it will not be overwhelmed by global capitalist imperialism. The way to do that is to build a relatively self-sufficient high-tech superpower economy shielded from Western takeover.

Analysing the relationship between the Chinese elite and capitalism is not simple. I won’t try it in this article, and I don’t think Smith has finished the job either. But by probing the causal role of that relationship in China’s horrifying volume of greenhouse gas emissions, Smith is pointing us in the right direction.

I will add to the conversation the two graphs, showing China’s, and the USA’s, share of global greenhouse gas emissions, and coal production, over the last thirty years. Quantity turns into quality. The sheer scale of China’s coal-fuelled boom has been one of the major factors that has exacerbated the climate crisis. The Chinese leadership pressed ahead with coal-based expansion, notwithstanding
the science of global warming, which was already clear in the late 1980s.
Deng Yingtao, an economist and government adviser, explained in a book published in 1991 the vital need to take a different road. (I published an account of his work here.) But China’s elite ignored such advice. This is a factor in the climate and ecological crisis we face now.

3. The Chinese government’s ruinous approach can not be described as a development policy. It prioritised, first, supplying manufactured goods to the world market, and then, creating a market for consumer goods in China.
In the half century since 1970, China’s economic policies have delivered gigantic improvements to the material living standards of its citizens. Levels of nutrition, income, literacy, health provision and electricity supply have risen for hundreds of millions of people.

Anyone who thinks tackling climate change has to go hand-in-hand with fighting for social justice welcomes such changes unequivocally.

But that is not the whole story. As industry grew in the 1990s, and that growth accelerated in the 2000s, as hundreds of millions of people moved to towns and new industrial zones and economic sectors were opened to private capital, much uglier aspects of economic expansion came to the foreground.
In his book, Richard Smith argues that China’s exports to the world market gained competitive advantage by (i) the low cost of “semi-coerced ultra-cheap workers to power light manufacturing”, (ii) “contempt for, and lack of spending on, environmental protection”, and (iii) the state’s capacity to work with investors to build physical infrastructure. The authoritarian political system helped (pages 2-4).

By the time of China’s twelfth five-year plan (2006-2010), Smith writes, the “blind growth” had turned into an orgy of overproduction, fuelled by relatively cheap labour and eco-insanity. He lists the excesses (pages 24-43), such as a car-building (and owning) craze that brought cities to a standstill with traffic jams, and, in the countryside, the construction of roads and rail links that no-one uses.

While in some regions migrant workers are packed in dormitories like sardines, ghost cities of empty skyscrapers have gone up elsewhere in property markets dominated by speculators. One example: Caofeidian on the Bohai Sea (cost $100 billion), which was to have been “the world’s first fully-realised eco-city”; planned for 1 million people, only a few thousand ever moved in. Vanity building projects abound, from mock Versailles palaces to an $11 million, 2300-tonne tower shaped like a puffer fish in Jiangsu province.
To pay for all this: the world’s worst record on industrial safety and environmental standards.
Smith argues (pages 126-153) that, amid this frenzy of scatter-gun investment, the command system of management and constraints on markets combine to incentivise corruption among the 90 million members of the Communist Party. The leadership’s constant anti-corruption campaigns have been no more successful than those in the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

There is a causal link between all this and China’s frightful level of greenhouse gas emissions. Smith explains in his article the key role of so-called “hard to abate” industrial sectors – that is, processes that with current or anticipated technology can not easily be decarbonised. “Steel, aluminium, cement, aviation, shipping, chemicals, plastics, textiles and electronics stand out”, he writes.
Smith makes a strong case that these activities, which feed export markets and many of the waste-strewn domestic sectors, would have to be drastically curtailed under any effective climate policy. The “hard to abate” sectors account for 47% of China’s greenhouse gas emissions, compared to 32% from electricity generation, which dominates discussions on decarbonisation.
One analytical question that flows from Smith’s work is: where does useful production that improves people’s lives end, and wasteful production driven by twisted relationships of power and wealth, and mis-labelled “growth”, begin? No easy answer, either in China or globally.

4. China is the world’s number one investor in renewable energy, but will not come near to meeting climate targets unless it slashes fossil fuel use.
On 12 December, Xi Jinping announced new 2030 climate targets at an on-line UN summit. The highlights were plans to raise wind and solar power generating capacity to 1200 gigawatts (GW), nearly three times the current 414 GW, and for fossil fuels’ share of the primary energy balance to go down to 75% from the current level of 88%. Environmental NGOs said that building wind and solar would not be enough to hit China’s own targets, leave alone targets that would forestall dangerous climate change. They estimate that 330 GW of China’s nearly 1100 GW of coal-fired capacity would have to be shut down too.

Smith, writing before this announcement, argued that while China’s government is still building solar and wind, “it has effectively abandoned transitioning to renewables”. He points to still-rising emissions, ongoing investment in coal, expansion of coal-to-gas facilities and the gigantic infrastructure building programme announced in March. (Part of that is a carbon-heavy high-speed rail plan slammed by transport researchers as senseless.)
In his book (pages 76-79), Smith compares the bureaucratic regulation of Chinese electricity networks unfavourably with market-based systems. He points to the outrageous level of “curtailment” of wind and solar power (i.e. the deliberate reduction of available renewable power, keeping it behind coal-fired power in the queue for space on the grid).
Smith is overstating his case on renewables in two ways, I think. First: if the Chinese ruling elite put its mind to it, I have little doubt that it could expand wind and solar capacity rapidly. It has already accomplished some of the most astonishing infrastructure projects in history, including near-total electrification on one hand, and the boondoggles that Smith denounces on the other.
Second: to build renewables infrastructure, state direction as opposed to market mechanisms might be an advantage. Throughout the history of capitalism it has almost always been state-directed investment that built railroads or...
But his starting point is the right one: what matters most is achieved, or even which way things will turn out in China. Smith doesn’t pretend to know how such changes will be ecossocialist economy. publicly owned, and democratically planned and managed capitalism and replace them both with some form of mostly cashier both Western capitalism and China’s communist economy. If humanity is to save itself, we have n...
1. Does the Chinese elite’s support for renewable electricity generation show that it is leading the way to an “ecological civilisation”?

The Chinese coal-fired boom of the last 20 years has made a substantial contribution to the climate and ecological emergency – and yet prominent “ecosocialists”, without reference to that boom and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s responsibility for it, accept at face value that party’s claims to be moving to “ecological civilisation”.

The role of China remains “crucial and contradictory”, the “ecological Marxist” John Bellamy Foster said in a recent keynote speech.

It is one of the most polluted and resource-hungry countries in the world, while its carbon emissions are so massive as to themselves constitute a global-scale problem. Nevertheless, China has done more than any other country thus far to develop alternative-energy technologies geared to the creation of what is officially [i.e. in China] referred to as an ecological civilisation.

At least, this time round, Foster made passing mention of those carbon emissions – although I haven’t found any other references to them in his writings. More often, he stresses that the renewables investment confirms that Chinese policy is moving the right way.

Foster starts a key 2015 article: “China’s leadership has called in recent years for the creation of a new ‘ecological civilisation’.” After reviewing CCP resolutions on this subject, Foster concludes: “There is no doubt that Chinese leadership has made significant steps toward a more sustainable development.”

As evidence he points to “the massive promotion of solar and wind technology”, “a growing share of non-fossil-fuel energy consumption”, as well as reductions in economic growth targets, new targets for carbon intensity of GDP, farmland protection and anti-pollution measures.

In 2017, in an article presenting “a Marxian view” of “the earth system crisis and ecological civilisation”, Foster pointed to China as a possible site for the launch of a “world ecological revolution”. China stood at a turning point, he argued: while “promoting very high rates of growth with the attendant horrendous economic problems”, it had also “raised the issue of ‘ecological civilisation’ and taken huge steps at shifting resources and technology towards environmental amelioration”. And:

[China] is known for some of the most serious forms of environmental damage on earth, while at the same time no country seems to be accelerating so rapidly into the new world of alternative energy.

“Massive promotion of wind and solar technology.” “Huge steps at shifting resources and technology.” “Seems to be accelerating [...] into the new world of alternative energy.”

It is difficult to capture the hollowness of these statements, made in the shadow of the greatest expansion of coal burning in world history.

In 2010, at the end of China’s first decade of accelerated growth, coal production was 3428 million tonnes, compared to 1384 million tonnes in 2000. The incremental output in 2010 – 2044 million tonnes – was more than the entire world’s coal output in 1960, at the height of the post-war boom.

Each year in the decade 2001-2010, China added to its coal output almost twice as much as Great Britain produced in total in 1870 (100 million tonnes), when it was a coal-driven hegemon. Between 2010 and 2015, China’s annual coal output rose by a further 318 million tonnes (about twice Poland’s total) to 3746 million tonnes.

Talk of “the massive promotion of wind and solar technology”, without discussing it in this context, is a monstrous delusion.

And what does “massive” mean, anyway? In 2016, energy supply from renewables in China was one-thirtieth of the supply from coal – a big improvement on 2000, when it was one-thousandth, but in volume terms dwarfed by coal’s expansion. (Those are my calculations from IEA energy statistics.)

Certainly, there have been substantial investments in wind and solar – but as in western countries that have done the same (e.g. Germany, Spain and the UK) these are puny compared to the ongoing support for fossil fuels. Even today, fossil fuels account for more than 85% of China’s primary energy supply.

The graph shows the increase in renewable energy use in China, compared to the increase in fossil fuel use.
The huge ramp-up of coal use in China this century is a factor in the climate and ecological crisis into which international capitalism has plunged the world. Discussion of the CCP’s pretensions to “ecological civilisation”, without taking this into account, plays into a false narrative. It strips words of their meaning. It obstructs discussion about how to resist the effects of that crisis and those who are exacerbating it.

2. Is the relationship of the Chinese bureaucratic system and capitalism a key factor in the global climate emergency?

The strength of Richard Smith’s book, China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse, is that – in contrast to those who take the CCP’s talk of “ecological civilisation” at face value – he interrogates the way that, in its relationship with capitalism, the CCP has fed into the climate and ecological crisis. (I described some of his arguments in the first part.)

It’s a great shame, then, that the first substantial review of Smith’s book from the “left” caricatures his attitude to capitalism and avoids serious discussion of the causes and consequences of the coal-fired boom.

The review, by Andrew Burgin on the Public Reading Rooms web site, attributes to Smith the view that a move from bureaucratically-directed capitalism (or whatever you want to call it – I’m agnostic about the labels) to “normal” capitalism is essential:

For Smith, China’s inability to protect its environment lies with state central planning and the absence of the profit motive. Under ‘normal’ capitalism a decline in profits will lead to a decline in production and a limit to growth. For Smith this is a necessary and essential step [from planning to ‘normal’ capitalism] to save the planet.

This parody of Smith’s view might give the impression that he favours “normal” capitalism against China’s bureaucratic-capitalist mashup. But that’s not true.

Smith does indeed point to ways in which bureaucratic, rather than market, incentives, exacerbate the frightful environmental damage done by the Chinese economy. The investment incentives for coal-fired power, and big unnecessary infrastructure projects, are two cases in point. (See the first part.)

But while Smith, in his attempts to understand and explain the Chinese mashup, repeatedly compares it to “normal” capitalism, in the political part of the book (chapters 6 and 7) he keeps repeating that he has no faith in any type of capitalism to confront the ecological crisis. For example, on page 194:

One way or another, the CCP is headed for the dustbin of history. [...] Yet however it falls, my contention here is that transitioning to capitalist democracy is not enough to save China or the world from climate collapse because no capitalism, green or otherwise, can accept the drastic changes we need to make to save ourselves.

There are other similar quotes in the first part.

Burgin’s readers, left with the impression that Smith is some sort of advocate of capitalism, may well turn away from the vital questions he raises. Not a good outcome.

The issue Smith points to is that – despite, and/or because of, the elements of state direction of the economy – China has given a massive push to the climate and ecological crisis. Any meaningful description of China’s relationship with world capitalism has to explain this fact.

3. Is “economic growth” in China a good thing?

Andrew Burgin writes:

Smith appears to be arguing that it is economic growth in itself which poses the central problem for humanity and that the protection of the planet and our future on it requires us to produce and consume less. This may be a possible strategy for sections of the population in the more advanced capitalist economies but it will not work for the impoverished billions in the Global South who understandably seek a better standard of living.

The first sentence sounds right: Smith thinks – and so do I – that humanity, through the medium of the global economy, needs to produce and consume less. But this is obviously a general statement about the world. It does not imply that I think that billions of people in the global south should not seek a better standard of living. Smith is big enough to talk up for himself, but there is nothing in his book to suggest that he thinks that, either.

Now here are some questions for Burgin.

Is our collective imagination really so barren that we can not envisage a world where the economy produces less (and therefore, in total, less is “consumed” (a word that itself needs to be broken down)), and, at the same time, the living standards of people in the global south – and large numbers of people in the global north, too – improve?

Is our imagination so empty that we can not understand the idea of living better, without that necessarily meaning more stuff (and by stuff I don’t mean food, clothing, shelter or any of the beautiful things in life, I mean the carbon-intensive commodities churned out by the capitalist economy)?

This is not a new conversation in social and labour movements. Hasn’t Andrew Burgin heard of it before?

I recall an incident at the Climate Camp in London in 2009, at a discussion session on capitalism and global warming attended by about 1000 people.

The Marxist writer David Harvie, responding to environmental “minimalists” who advocated restraining consumption, said: “I am not going to go and say to a billion Chinese people, ‘you have to make do with less’. I am going to tell them: ‘you should have more’. [Shocked outrage from a quarter of the audience.] The question is: more of what?”

When I started writing the People & Nature blog in 2011, I commented on this (here, see section 6):

My answer to “more of what?”, which I think is close to Harvie’s own answer, would be along these lines: 1. The basic means of subsistence (far from guaranteed to all Chinese families in 2011) must be secured for people in China and everywhere else, which can be done more than adequately with the existing level of technology. 2. People will become truly wealthy – i.e. they will lead full, fruitful and creative lives – as consumption is freed from the constraints of necessity and from the
4. Has the Chinese state “developed the productive forces” in a way that weakens capitalism?

Western leftist enthusiasts for China are fond of pointing to the “development of productive forces” achieved under the CCP. Burgin writes:

Despite repressive and authoritarian elements within the political system in China, the CCP maintains support because of the development of the productive forces and the consequent improvements in people’s cultural and material life.

Burgin writes that Marxists who consider China to be a capitalist social formation need to explain “how under capitalism has such a massive development of the productive forces taken place?”

I would suggest we go back a step, and ask what we mean by “development of the productive forces” in the first place. For Marx, the productive forces comprised humanity’s natural surroundings, the instruments of labour used by humans to take what they need from those surroundings, and the people using those instruments of labour (in capitalist society, the working class). Marx envisaged that the more capitalist social relations shaped, mis-shaped and constrained these forces of production, the sharper would grow the tension between them.

Throughout the twentieth century, these meanings were almost lost to Marxists witnessing the travails of the Soviet Union and China. Those countries’ leaders subordinated everything to industrialisation, and to increasing labour productivity. By reducing the idea of “the development of productive forces” to these goals, many western Marxists lost sight of its broader meaning.

It was as though Marx had never written chapter 15 of Capital volume 1, where he explains how capital turns dead labour, in the form of machines, into tyranny over living labour; as though he had never railed against that tyranny and written, “the instrument of labour strikes down the labourer”.

To understand modern China, I think we need to recover this understanding of the way that capitalist social relations corrode, control and pervert the productive forces, in the very process of production turning them against humanity. If this is not what is happening on building sites erecting ghost cities, in prison-like factories producing i-Phones for the international market, and in mines (with the world’s worst safety record) ripping out climate-trashing coal to be wastefully burned, I don’t know what is.

In other words, we need to distinguish between the “development of the productive forces”, and the vastly more complex process of change in China. There has been breakneck industrialisation and breakneck urbanisation. While labour has been cheap enough to flood the world market with Chinese products, the fear of workers’ action – even under an authoritarian, anti-union government – has, as far as I understand, driven up wage levels in many sectors, to the extent that labour in other Asian countries is in some cases far cheaper.

But this economic expansion is two sided. The benefit of Richard Smith’s research is that he examines its destructive, anti-human side: the super-exploitation of tens of millions of newly-urbanised workers; the environmental havoc, on a scale that dwarfs what Marx observed in 19th-century England; and the consequences in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, which was fully understood by the CCP as they ordered the sinking of countless coal mines ... but is only now becoming visible to most Chinese people in the form of storms, rising sea level and the desertification of parts of the interior.

It would be a bad mistake to mis-identify China’s economic growth as “the development of the productive forces”. And an even worse mistake to mis-use that Marxist label to justify policies that contribute so much to intensifying exploitation and exacerbating the climate danger.

5. Does the Chinese state embody something revolutionary or anti-capitalist, to be protected from capitalism? If so, what?

John Foster, writing in October last year (in the introduction to a special issue of Monthly Review on China), claimed that Xi Jinping is “reviving the role of Marxist political economy”, and: “All the signs are that China is seeking to defend the strategic noncapitalist elements of its system as a
response to the growing hostility of imperial capital at the centre of the world economy.”

These elements were socialist, he suggested in his 2017 article: in contrast to the “capitalist road” taken by former Soviet states, China, while “clearly taking the ‘capitalist road’ to socialism, never completely renounced its socialist goals, nor gave up on the planning system entirely”.

What he does not explain or discuss is how the state control and direction of the economy – which is presumably what he means by “strategic noncapitalist elements” – has not reduced, and, as Smith has shown, is in many respects intensifying, the exploitation of Chinese working people and the natural world in which all people live.

Andrew Burgin contrasts China to the former Soviet states:

China has managed to avoid the fate of the Soviet Union; it has navigated a different course by integrating within the global economy in a way that the Soviet Union never was. It is an economic peer of the US and by 2040 its economy is projected to be twice the size of the US economy.

The first point here is that the frightful prospect of unmitigated economic growth, in the context of the world capitalist economy – with the associated human and ecological damage – does not seem to scare Burgin as much as it scares me.

The second point is that comparisons of China and the former USSR can be facile. Meaningful analysis would consider both the differences and the similarities.

Clearly the horrendous slump and hyperinflation of the early 1990s in Russia and Ukraine, as Soviet industries collapsed, and the exacerbation of the demographic and health crises, were in many ways outcomes of the collapse of the USSR. But the economic stagnation that prepared the ground for them was a Soviet phenomenon.

At that time the Chinese government, having repressed the Tiananmen square generation of protesters in a way the Soviet authorities were unable to do, was preparing for its own opening to the market. Urban workers were always protected from unemployment by the state firms. But that protection persisted in parts of Russia too – not to mention Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, where state institutions were not turned upside down in the way they were in European former Soviet states.

A comparative study of employment, underemployment and precarious employment in the former USSR and China would probably reveal many similarities and differences. This was two very different versions of opening up to the market – but opening up it was, in both cases.

The comparisons would anyway be limited by the ways in which the Chinese and former Soviet labour forces are worlds apart: the one many times larger, cheaper and less urbanised than the other.

As for the state: the Soviet state collapsed and the Chinese state did not. Even as it opened up to capitalism, the Chinese state retained control of the banking system and some key branches of the economy. But as of 2021, while the manner of its integration into world capitalism is very different from Russia’s, the fact of integration is not.

Richard Smith’s book examines the manner of this integration, in the context of the severe rupture of the relationship between humans and nature of which China’s coal-fired boom is part. The developmental achievements of the Chinese state (gains in health, literacy, electrification, poverty reduction and so on) do not cancel out the harsh reality of this integration, or the Chinese elite’s role in it.

That is what Smith is trying to start a discussion about, and some people are not listening.

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