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Chinese Interpretations of Sustainable Development

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Introduction

Today, there is widespread agreement among both Chinese and foreign observers that China's extraordinary economic growth following the economic reforms introduced some 25 years ago, has come at great environmental costs. The economic policy of the reforms with an emphasis on industrialisation and rapid economic growth has led to an intolerable pressure on natural resources and severe environmental problems such as deforestation, desertification, and heavy urban air pollution. The situation cannot, however, solely be blamed on the present Chinese leadership. The grave state of China's environment partly stems from disastrous environmental policies and administration practices during the Mao-era and has roots far back in Chinese history¹.

The environment is a central issue in Chinese politics today, and environmental protection is one of the areas where a relatively open public debate is actually possible and where scientists and intellectuals are encouraged to engage in the discussion. The Chinese authorities have in recent years been increasingly preoccupied by a growing number of locally organised protests related to environmental problems. These protests have been directed at either polluting factories or power plants ruining the local environment or initiatives from the government attempting to check environmental degradation, such as logging bans that have constrained local means of income and economic development². These incidents of environmental protests highlight the dilemma of the Chinese government striving to balance its focus on economic development with the concern of growing environmental problems in China and conciliate various groups in Chinese society having varying and often contradicting interests and agendas.

During the 1990s, China participated in a number of international conferences on co-operation in environmental protection. During the negotiations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change at the Earth Summit in 1992, China was an active and influential participant and was later among the first countries to draft its national Agenda 21 after signing the international Agenda 21 in 1992. Along with its increasing involvement in international co-operation in the 1990s, the term *Sustainable development* has become part of contemporary Chinese political discourse and public debate on environment and development, and there is a wealth of scientific literature, white papers, and political reports on the topic. This paper deals with the official Chinese discourse on sustainable development seen in the light of international interpretations.

Two issues of development: Growth versus environmental protection and the role of women

The concept of sustainable development is open to many different interpretations. In the paper, I use the term in a broad sense, as a strategy to obtain equally an economically sound growth, simultaneously preserving the environment and promoting social development with equity and democracy. Contemporary theories of development reject the "classic" distinction

¹ See Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Mark Elvin, "The Environmental Legacy of Imperial China", *The China Quarterly*, no. 156, Dec. (1998), pp. 9-32.

² Mette Halskov Hansen, "Environmental Problems and Protection in Southwest China: Perspectives From Below", unpublished article, University of Oslo and Jun Jing, "Environmental Protests in Rural China", in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elisabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2000).

between human development and environmental protection. Without a healthy environment and sufficient natural resources, the foundation for development is fragile. To poor and vulnerable people who are dependant of the earth or other natural resources and living in environmentally degraded areas, the environment is not only a prerequisite for achieving development. In terms of well-being and quality of life, the environment becomes a measure of which stage of development their lives are situated.

Even though the concept of sustainable development holds a promise of the possibility of achieving economic growth without compromising the environment, politicians and economists all over the world still struggle to weigh their preferences for what should be considered the most important: growth or environmental protection? This also includes the Chinese government that dedicates the first pages of its Agenda 21 to its reflections on the issue.

The role of women

“Participation” and “empowerment” constitute two important paradigms in mainstream development thinking in the West today. Since the UN Women’s Decade in 1976-85 and the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, most major development agencies and organisations have adopted gender equity³ as a cross-cutting issue in their strategies. Two paradigms are dominant. The *Women in Development* (WID) approach stresses a strengthening of women’s social standing through education and participation in decision-making as an important means for increasing women’s welfare and the efficiency of development interventions⁴. The *Gender and Development* (GAD) approach emphasises that gender equity first and foremost constitutes a societal ideal and one of the ends of development in itself⁵.

Outline and working questions

The contents of this paper will later be written into a chapter of my thesis. The main objective of the chapter is to examine whether participation in international co-operation on development has provided a learning process for the Chinese government in terms of increased sensitivity towards issues of environment and development and an internalisation of these values into policy and decision-making processes. In order to do so, I have reviewed parts of China’s Agenda 21 – the White Paper on Population, Environment and Development of China in the twenty-first Century (hereafter called China’s Agenda 21)⁶ and compared it to

³ There have been widespread discussions in feminist circles whether the fundamental issue in feminism should be gender *equity* or *equality*. According to Skutsch (Margaret M. Skutsch, “The gender issue in energy project planning. Welfare, empowerment or efficiency?”, in *Energy Policy*, 1998, vol. 26, no. 12, pp. 945-955), the definition of ‘equity’ is ‘an agreed upon and fair system of distribution of rights, power and money between men and women’, whereas ‘equality’ is ‘the equal share of these [aforementioned] things’. In development interventions, the term equality may be the most important, since it is by equal participation in development and benefiting from the project outcomes that equity is achieved (p. 947).

⁴ A 1997 World Bank evaluation of 185 projects showed that projects with clear gender-related objectives succeeded to a relatively higher degree in obtaining their goals, than ‘gender-blind’ projects at the same time and in the same sector (Cecelski 2000:2, quote Murphy 1997).

⁵ Skutsch, 1998.

⁶ State Science and Technology Commission (SSTC) et.al, China’s Agenda 21: The white paper on China’s population, environment, and development in the 21st century, 1994. Internet edition: (http://www.zhb.gov.cn/english/SD/21cn/write_paper/index.htm).

the international Agenda 21. I have decided to focus on statements concerning the relationship between economic growth and environmental protection, and of women's rights and participation in decision-making and implementation of policies. These areas are of central concern to the Chinese government and important and much debated issues of international development theory.

The international Agenda 21 is, still, only one contribution to the debate. In some respects, for instance with regards to women's participation, the views expressed in the international Agenda 21 are very close to the ones in the Chinese. I have included other and broader approaches to development in my discussion in order to provide a critical analysis of the Chinese interpretations.

My studies have led to the formulation of the following working questions:

- What are the major objectives and priorities of the Chinese government with regards to sustainable development and which measures for their implementation are introduced?
- How is the concept interpreted by the Chinese government? Which dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, etc.) are discussed? How are they represented, and which dimensions are given priority?
- How is the relation between the international discourse and the Chinese interests handled?
- Has Agenda 21 led to any changes in Chinese attitudes and perceptions? Has the introduction of new development strategies and objectives led to an internalisation of new values in official Chinese perceptions of development, i.e. are the pronouncements in the Chinese Agenda 21 purely rhetorical, or do they contain any substantial meaning?

The last question implies an examination of the actual practices of the Chinese government in order to assess whether these new objectives and values are translated into practice. This clearly goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, the question provides a preliminary outline of some important issues that can lead to further studies.

Sustainable Development

The concept *Sustainable Development* was introduced in the *World Conservation Strategy* jointly published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature in 1981. In 1987 the concept was formulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the report *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report) as “[development that] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁷. After the publication of the Brundtland report, the term has been widely adopted by a host of different actors and has become a buzzword among politicians, scholars, grass root activists and journalists in the debate on environmental protection and development

⁷ The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Due to its rather vague formulation in the Brundtland Report, the term is still a much-debated concept and many new definitions have been brought up since then. I have chosen to use the term in a broad sense, as adopted by a host of different development organisations, ranging from Oxfam to the World Bank⁸. Here, sustainable development is seen as an ongoing process, consisting of three interacting and interdependent elements, namely:

- Responsible and sound economic development with equity;
- Environmental protection, and;
- Social development, promoting equity among all humans, good governance, and human rights⁹.

Indian economist Amartya Sen's model of development as freedom¹⁰ is especially inspiring. Sen defines freedom from poverty, political repression, disease, and poor economic opportunities, as the most important prerequisite for, as well as the primary end of, development. He argues that truly sustainable economic development will only occur with social and political empowerment of all members of society and he demonstrates how women's education and emancipation have resulted in lower birth rates and infant mortality rates. The connection between free agency and lower birth rates is especially interesting in the case of China and its strict one-child policy. What is likewise interesting is the fact that Sen does not necessarily see economic growth as an engine to development as is the case with parts of the official discourse in e.g. China, or economic development and liberalisation leading to political and spiritual liberalisation, as is the case with liberalist political thought in the West.

Chinese interpretations of sustainable development: Agenda 21

In June 1992, China participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio, also known as the Earth Summit. The Earth Summit resulted in the formulation of a number of international documents, among these *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development*¹¹, a global action plan for development and environmental protection, which was adopted by more than 178 governments. The Action Plan outlines an extensive list of programme areas and strategies for achieving sustainable development. In order to implement Agenda 21, the governments that had adopted the plan took up the task of formulating national Agenda 21 and strategies for their implementation.

China began drafting its national Agenda 21 in July 1992, immediately after the Earth Summit. An extensive group of ministries, government departments, and more than 300 experts under the supervision of the State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission spent the next two years drawing up the Agenda that was approved by the State Council on 25 March 1994. The final text consists of 20 chapters and 78

⁸ These organisations, however, to some extent still fail to clearly define the meaning of the concept and have quite differing views on the means of its implementation.

⁹ James H Weaver, *Achieving Broad-Based Sustainable Development. Governance, Environment, and Growth with Equity* (Connecticut: Kumarian Press, Inc., 1997).

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

¹¹ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), *Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 1993).

programme areas, ranging from economic policy to education and natural resource conservation.

The wording of the Chinese Agenda 21 reflects how the Chinese government has attempted to match the contents of the national Agenda 21 with its own political and economic priorities. One of the central points in the international Agenda 21 is the principle that particular consideration must be paid to the situation of “economies in transition”¹². This has opened for the inclusion in the Chinese text of the phrase “China’s Agenda 21 has been formulated so that it corresponds with [the international] Agenda 21 and reflects the Chinese situation”¹³. Hereafter, issues such as economic growth, a deepening of the reforms and opening, and the promotion of a socialist market economy are emphasised¹⁴.

Economic growth versus environmental protection

Regardless of claims in China’s Agenda 21 that “[...] mankind has no choice but to re-examine its social and economic behaviour and its path of development”¹⁵, environmental protection is regarded as subordinate to economic development, which can be seen from the following quote:

For China [...] the precondition for sustainable development is development” [...] and while it is necessary for China to embark on a *gradual* path to sustainable development, it must do this at the same time as it is improving economic conditions and structures, enhancing their effectiveness and maintaining an annual average GNP growth rate of between 8 and 9% [Italics added]¹⁶.

According to the Chinese government the reason for this position is the fact that China is a developing country and that

Only when the economic growth rate reaches and is sustained at a certain level, can poverty be eradicated, people’s livelihoods improved and the necessary forces and conditions for supporting sustainable development provided¹⁷.

The Chinese vision of development is dominated by the perception of development as equal to economic growth. According to the Chinese government the most efficient way to eradicate poverty is through rapid economic growth that will “engender a common prosperity”¹⁸. This approach is rooted in the *trickle-down* model of development that dominated mainstream development thinking up to the 1970s. Within this theoretical framework development is perceived as a trickle-down process, where everyone will eventually benefit equally from the changes brought about by economic growth, modernisation, and industrialisation. This approach, however, has been demonstrated not to be valid, as problems of infrastructure and market conditions, the marginalisation of vulnerable groups in society and a host of other factors hinders the distribution of wealth to all members of society. Besides, this growth-

¹² Article 1.1. The term “economies in transition” include developing countries, among these China.

¹³ Article 1.6

¹⁴ Articles 2.4(a), 4.2, etc.

¹⁵ Article 1.1

¹⁶ Article 2.1

¹⁷ Article 2.1

¹⁸ Article 8.6

oriented approach ignores the “softer” interpretations of development, such as freedom and justice.

Social development and the role of women

The Chinese Agenda 21 pays a lot of attention to the “social aspects of sustainable development”¹⁹. The Chinese concept of social development, however, involves other ideas than that of Western discourses. In the Chinese context social development is mainly understood in a “materialist” sense with a focus on well-being, infrastructure, and health care. Family planning and a strict control of population growth are outlined as central priorities. These objectives are to be implemented through education, campaigns and moral education, all standard Chinese procedures. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese population policy does not harmonise with the idea of participation and free agency as a way to reduce fertility rates. And, it certainly is not compatible with the ideals of good governance and democracy. These contradictions are not addressed in the text, even though issues of women’s liberation and participation are dealt with extensively in several chapters.

The Chinese Agenda 21 is clearly written within the WID paradigm. The text handles the contradictions between its focus on population control and free agency by evoking the value of women’s participation as an instrument to achieving development and solely focus on this aspect. Drawing on the international Agenda, the text states:

Agenda 21 has placed special emphasis on [...] economic, legal, administrative, cultural, and social obstacles that hinder women from full participation in sustainable development (Article 20.5) [...]. The form and degree of their participation determine the rate at which the objectives of sustainable development are realized²⁰.

Women’s participation is represented in the text as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development. Increasing women’s involvement in decision-making is, in line with Western discourse, seen as an instrument to alleviate poverty, a way to tap the “untapped resource”²¹ of women’s labour and capabilities, whereas the “idealistic” dimension is left out of the discussion.

Balancing international and national development objectives

It is especially interesting to see how the consideration for the main points in the two documents is balanced in China’s Agenda 21. The two discourses are integrated, for instance by evoking concepts like “environmental protection with Chinese Characteristics”²², a term that sounds very much like “socialism with Chinese Characteristics”. At the same time, the text integrates parts of the wording of the international Agenda 21 that are formulated in accordance with the Chinese priorities. The Chinese priorities are presented as being similar to the main contents of the international priorities, and vice versa:

The Chinese Government is determined to implement China’s Agenda 21. This is not only because Chinese highest leaders take it seriously, but also because it will help to create a sound

¹⁹ Article 2.2

²⁰ Article 20.1

²¹ I have borrowed this metaphor from Caroline O. N. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development. Theory, Practice and Training* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

²² Article 1.8

environment for sustainable economic development, for deepening reforms and opening to the outside world and for establishing a socialist market economy²³.

Often, however, the authors do not fully adhere to their own definitions, or they later contradict themselves. For instance, the text rejects the traditional practice of considering economic growth solely in terms of quantitative measures. But, not a single time do the writers mention any alternative definitions, or use the term in another way. The focus is solely on development in terms of GNP growth rate.

Learning from international co-operation

It is hard to tell whether the new ideas that the Chinese government has been exposed to through participation in international co-operation has had any profound impact on the way the government thinks about development and environmental protection. The trickle-down model has been widely rejected by most scholars and donors in the West and major development schemes have been evoked to ensure that the growth engendered by development projects and foreign assistance is equally distributed among recipients. Still, the Chinese government sticks to this outdated approach. With regards to economic development, it does not seem as if the Chinese opinion has undergone any major changes.

A review of China's Agenda 21 does show that the government to some extent has been influenced by international discourse. The text evokes some common definitions and seems to interpret them quite progressively, for instance in the case of women's education and participation as an instrument to eradicate poverty and reduce fertility rates. The link between raising women's educational level and social capital and lower fertility rates are, at least partly, recognised. Still, the objective is not free agency and democratic participation, but to create development and growth²⁴. As is the case with women's participation, the text focuses on non-political aspects of the issues, and leave the ideological contents well behind.

At some points, as mentioned earlier, it seems as if the writers are only paying lip service to the phrases they evoke, only to contradict themselves later. Some concepts are still interpreted and represented in the "traditional" Chinese way, for instance in the case of social development, where there is an emphasis on housing and food security. And, the proposed measures for the implementation of new policies are still "traditional" for the Chinese, i.e. an emphasis on moral education and campaigns.

To sum up these observations, it does not seem as if new ideas have come into play. Still, the Chinese interpretation and wording in this area is not fundamentally different from the one of the international Agenda 21, which also emphasises the importance of women's participation as an instrument to obtain development, without mentioning equity as an end in itself. The two documents seem to be written within the WID paradigm.

In order to fully answer the question of learning it is necessary to study the development of Chinese environmental policy and management in years to come. Still, there are many indications of a positive development in Chinese thinking on development. The Chinese government is well aware of the need to change the previous path of development, and do express a sincere motivation to do so not only in rhetoric, but also in practice.

²³ Article 1.8

²⁴ Article 7.21

Conclusion

Since its first official definition in the 1980s, the term sustainable development has become a catchword for any government, organisation, or institution that wants to demonstrate its will to develop its national economy without causing harm to the environment and resources for its contemporaries and generations to come. Still, the term is rather loose and during the last two decades a many interpretations and forms of implementation have been proposed. The Agenda 21, one of the final documents from the Earth summit is one example of various discourses on development from the 1990s.

The Chinese national Agenda 21 is part of this discourse. In some respects the Agenda is a reflection of the views and objectives of the international version. In other respects, for instance with the concept of “environmental protection with Chinese characteristics”, the contents of the Chinese Agenda 21 are completely adjusted to the Chinese political and economic agenda.

The main objective of this paper has been to examine if Chinese approaches to two major areas of development theory, i.e. the relationship between economic growth and environmental protection and the role of women in development, have undergone any significant changes during the drafting of its national Agenda 21. Some aspects of the text indicate that changes are taking place, albeit slowly. Still, a full examination of this relationship requires a study of the history of Chinese discourses on development, as well as official decision-making and implementation in this field in years to come.