

5.8 Social Considerations

It is not possible to make a credible prediction of China's future social development. During the reform era, China has seen significant social change (such as increased labour mobility) and in the future may see even more dramatic social changes in the relationship between the state and its citizens. Yet social change in general, and specifically social change related to environmental pressure, need not result in violence. For the social effects of environmental stress to become violent, certain conditions appear to be needed.

First, there must be sustained dissatisfaction with the environmental conditions. Given the choices the Chinese public need to make between environmental stress and economic growth, there is little to suggest that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the environment. Chinese peasants and urban workers are not altruistic consumers concerned with intergenerational equity. Applying the typography of environmental stress (global commons, regional or local), it is also likely that where environmental discontent exists, or may most readily develop, it is with local conditions and not global commons issues. It is highly unlikely that biodiversity in the Amazon basin or longer term global warming contributed in part by coal-use in China are of significant interest to the average Chinese peasant.

Second, there must be obstacles to the public expressing preferences on environmental issues in a peaceful manner, or a lack of governmental response to environmental problems of interest to the populace. On the first part of this point, obstacles to the public expression of concern, the Chinese government has a poor record. On the latter part on government responsiveness, while the Chinese government could do more for the environment, it has taken some action to address environmental degradation. The question is whether the Chinese government's actions to date are in keeping with the public's view of appropriate environmental responses given competing priorities. There is little evidence that there exists a major government-public disconnect in this regard, at least for the time being.

Moreover, for serious challenges to authority, although not necessarily through violent confrontation, disenchantment needs to be organized. Interest groups may stem from a number of origins, such as specific issues, ethnicity, religion, politics or social class. In Western countries, the interaction of such groups and the authorities is considered a normal part of the policy dialogue, and differences in views rarely result in violence. In China, there is currently no strong, well-organized interest group