THE GREENING OF SELF-INTEREST: WHY IS CHINA STANDING FIRM ON ITS CLIMATE COMMITMENTS DESPITE US REGRESSION?

by

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Abstract

International observers might have expected China to respond to US defection on climate change with a similar defection, but it has shown no signs of doing so. Why? This paper argues that Chinese commitment to environmental targets, embodied by the Paris Agreement, is the result of a greening of self-interest: in other words, China has realised its existing domestic and foreign policy goals are best served by a realignment from unrestrained to more sustainable development. The primary drivers of this shift are the pursuit of domestic legitimacy, the economic benefits of industrial efficiency and green technology production, and a desire to improve China's international reputation. The paper will utilise a range of academic, media and direct political sources to uncover the reality of Chinese foreign policy motivation piece by piece. It will end by reflecting on two logical corollaries of the main question: first, will China simply discard its climate commitments if the incentives it is faced with start to favour untrammelled environmental exploitation again? Discursive chains, norm internalisation and influence over the global normative framework may operate against this outcome. Second, how will Chinese leadership in the international sphere influence the nature of global environmental norms themselves? China's climate strategy appears to embrace the consumption-led, industrial capitalist conception of environmentalism which already prevails, suggesting this rising giant is likely to further entrench existing norms rather than shift the world towards genuinely sustainable solutions.

Lay Summary

In the past, China and the United States have been unwilling to commit to environmental targets without the other doing so too. The US under Trump's administration is backing out of its commitments on climate change. Therefore, we would expect to see China doing the same, but it is not. The purpose of this paper is to explore the various reasons for why this might be, and pinpoint the main ones. I find that the most important factors are: first, Chinese citizens not just wanting material wealth but also clean air and water; second, improving the economy by making it more efficient and selling renewable energy technology to other countries; and third, boosting China's international reputation. At the end of the paper I argue that China may find its commitment to environmental issues harder to discard in the future than expected, and finally that China's highly technological and commercial solutions to climate change fit in well with existing views about environmentalism on the world stage rather than offering something new.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Charlie Bain

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my uncle, Philip, for persuading me to stay at university in 2009.

"He who finds the just cause has many to assist him. He who loses the just cause has few to assist him"[1]
– Mencius

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Conundrum

The election of Donald Trump as American President in 2016 has thrown up all manner of conundrums for political scientists, but perhaps the most interesting one from an environmental politics point of view is this: given Chinese commitment to tackling climate change has previously seemed so tightly bound to reciprocal US action, why is the Trump administration's severe downgrading of environmental issues failing to have a knock-on effect on Chinese climate policy? This paper will consider a range of answers to that question, including: first, continued Chinese commitment to meeting its environmental targets is just rhetoric and will not be seriously enforced; second, decentralised pressure from markets, civil society groups, government bureaucracies, and even local administrations like cities, is forcing the central government's hand; third, there are economic, and perhaps even political, benefits to being a global leader in the production of green technology; fourth, environmental damage now directly affects the lives of so many Chinese citizens it is harming the Communist Party's legitimacy; fifth, there is an entrenched cultural antipathy to destruction of nature which is feeding into opposition to unrestrained economic development; sixth, there are security reasons for promoting green energy, both strategic and even existential; seventh, China is trying to capture the normative high ground on climate change to enhance its standing in international society, and perhaps even challenge US leadership; finally, the Chinese may have been socialised by the international community to value action on climate change under a logic of appropriateness.

[1] Mencius, quoted in Qingxin Wang – "Cultural Norms and the Conduct of Chinese Foreign Policy," in Hu et. al, p.147

The paper will conclude that continued Chinese commitment to the Paris Agreement is heavily influenced by three main factors: first, the government's quest for domestic legitimacy; second, by two key strands of its legitimacy, namely economic growth and environmental health, being made more compatible by industrial efficiency and the commercial benefits of green technology; and third, as suggested in the Mencius quote above, by the opportunities generated through being a respected leader in the international society of states. China's stance represents what could be called a greening of self-interest: its leaders continue to be focused on maximising Chinese power in a largely self-help system of states, and still "would never voluntarily accept an arrangement that leaves them worse off,"[2] but by recognising both the hard and soft power benefits offered by a shift from unrestrained to more sustainable development China's understanding of 'worse off' has subtly altered, incentivising it to work a level of environmental concern into its national policy. To be clear, the word 'sustainability' will be used throughout this paper simply to mean 'a more environmentally friendly path than the current one,' as opposed to the definition in the oft quoted Brundtland Report which takes sustainable development to be "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[3] In other words, at least until the final section, using the word 'sustainable' does not imply a belief that the policy or action under consideration is sufficiently drastic to protect future generations from climate disaster. The conclusion will explore whether China's apparent environmental concern is likely to become entrenched as a factor in future policy-making, pointing out the ways discursive constraints, norm internalisation and the opportunities afforded by increased norm-making power may act against any easy discarding of its climate commitments. The paper will end by considering the impact a rising China may have on global environmental norms, concluding that, despite having a very different domestic political structure to international norm-makers in recent history, it is

[2] Krasner, p.27
[3] UN World Commission on Environment and Development, p.41

most likely to perpetuate the prevailing industrial capitalist form of 'environmentalism' rather than a more radical version.

1.2 The Background

In November 2014 China and the US, then led by Barack Obama, revealed a bilateral agreement to significantly reduce carbon emissions going forward. It was the first time China had agreed to curb its emissions, and in exchange the US committed to its own large reductions by 2025.[4] This agreement was a critical foundation in the successful conclusion of the UN Paris Agreement on climate change the following year, and gives an indication of the extent to which each of China and America saw the other locking itself into emissions cuts as an essential precondition of its own emissions cuts. This is hardly surprising: any serious environmental commitments are likely to reduce a state's ability to maximise economic growth, or at least reduce its flexibility in pursuing that end. As the two largest economies in the world, it would make little sense for either China or the US to unilaterally damage its own competitiveness compared to a major rival without assurances of similar, self-imposed economic constraints on the other side. Indeed, the Sino-American rivalry undermined the 1997 Kyoto Protocol for more than a decade because of exactly this concern of preserving relative advantage.[5] The 2014 bilateral agreement conjured up an image of a classic institutional (neoliberal) solution to a collective action problem. At least in purely economic terms, both China and the US would have preferred the other to place constraints on its own competitiveness without having to do so itself, so the agreement provided a mechanism through which to reach a cooperative, globally beneficial outcome. If one of the two states defected, freeing itself from any constraints on economic growth, a rational choice theorist would expect the other state to defect immediately too rather than be left with the 'sucker's payoff.' At the

[4] "US and China strike deal on carbon cuts in push for global climate change pact," Lenore Taylor and Tania Branigan, *The Guardian*, 12/11/14
[5] "China emerges as global climate leader in wake of Trump's triumph," Isabel Hilton, *The Guardian*, 22/11/16

time of the bilateral agreement or the Paris summit there appeared little chance of being able to test this hypothesis, at least in the near future. However, nobody then could have predicted how events would unfold in the United States.

1.3 American Action

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential race has left America's climate leadership in tatters. Any hopes that his pre-election position (he famously labelled climate change a Chinese hoax) might be softened by the solemnity of office have proven unfounded: every action taken by the Trump administration on the environment suggests active belligerence towards it, starting with the symbolic decision to appoint Scott Pruitt, a known climate change sceptic, as head of the Environmental Protection Agency.[6] The first months of 2017 saw a systematic deletion of information relating to global warming from the EPA's website, a source which had previously been an internationally respected collection of accessible information regarding anthropocentric climate change.[7] More generally, since being elected, Trump and his administration have "sought to unravel domestic climate policies by dismantling the clean power plan…halting new emissions standards for cars and trucks and opening up new areas of public lands and oceans to mining and drilling,"[8] often explicitly couching these decisions in terms of being pro-business, pro-investment and, therefore, pro-economic growth. Trump's 2018 budget proposal, titled 'A New Foundation for American Greatness,' would see the EPA's budget cut by 31 percent, more than any other agency,[9] though the actual cuts approved by Congress before the new fiscal year begins on 1 October 2017 are likely to be far less extreme.[10] Overall, these policies were

[6] "The climate change battle dividing Trump's America," Andrew Anthony, *The Observer*, 18/03/17
[7] "EPA website removes climate science site from public view after two decades," Chris Mooney and Juliet Eilperin, *The Washington Post*, 29/04/17
[8] "G20 leaders' statement on climate change highlights rift with US," Oliver Milman, *The Guardian*, 08/07/17
[9] "A running list of how Trump is changing the environment," Michael Greshko, Laura Parker and Brian Clark Howard, *National Geographic*, 14/06/17
[10] "House GOP budget ignores Trump's budget cuts to domestic agencies," Erik Wasson, *Bloomberg*, 18/07/17

greeted with unease around the world, and soon enough the US administration's regulation-repealing attention turned from the domestic to the international sphere.

On 1 June 2017, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement, citing apparent concerns about the economy and national sovereignty, and calling the accord a "draconian" piece of international legislation.[11] The Paris Agreement is a climate accord signed in 2016 by 195 of the 197 countries which are party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.[12] The US will join Nicaragua and Syria as the only other non-signatories,[13] though countries that have not yet ratified the agreement are more numerous: as of July 2017, 153 parties (152 states plus the EU) had ratified the Paris Agreement including both the US and China.[14] The key commitments of the Paris accord are "holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels"[15] and demanding that "parties shall account for their nationally determined contributions,"[16] using a ratchet mechanism to discourage states from backsliding on their domestically determined emissions targets. While it has been criticised for a variety of reasons, from favouring developed countries to having weak compliance mechanisms,[17] the Paris Agreement is "the first global accord on climate change that contains policy obligations for all countries."[18] For the US to walk away from it is highly damaging both materially (for the environment) and symbolically (for state multilateralism). Technically the US will not actually withdraw from the Paris Agreement until 2020,[19] but given international treaties usually rely significantly on self-enforcement, especially when the state

[11] "Trump will withdraw U.S. from Paris Climate Agreement," Michael Shear, *The New York Times*, 01/06/17
[12] The Paris Agreement, http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php
[13] "Theresa May accused of 'cowardice' over response to US withdrawal from Paris Accord," Laura Hughes, *The Telegraph*, 02/06/17
[14] Paris Agreement – Status of Ratification, http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9444.php
[15] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, p.3
[16] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, p.5
[17] Dimitrov, p.7
[18] Dimitrov, p.2
[19] "The U.S. won't actually leave the Paris climate deal anytime soon," Brad Plumer, *The New York Times*, 07/06/17

in question is the most powerful country in the world, it seems clear that the new US administration has no intention of even attempting to meet its climate commitments from now on. Given this sea change in policy coming out of Washington, and the knowledge that, "for China, compliance with the climate change instruments involves relatively large…domestic economic costs,"[20] we might have expected a similar dismissal of environmental issues by the Chinese for fear of losing ground on the US economically.

1.4 Chinese Reaction

This response has not been forthcoming. A delegate of China's National Development and Reform Commission, Chen Zhihua, confirmed just a few days after Trump's victory, "no matter what happens in the new US government, China will continue to constructively participate in the international climate change process."[21] A few weeks later at the COP22 global climate conference held in Marrakech, the Chinese deputy foreign minister, Liu Zhenmin, reiterated his country's position by making clear that any change in US policy "won't affect China's commitment to support climate negotiations and also the implementation of the Paris Agreement."[22] Most notably, Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, delivered a speech at the World Economic Forum in January 2017 in which he underlined the continued commitment of China to tackling climate change: "the Paris Agreement is a hard-won achievement which is in keeping with the underlying trend of global development. All signatories should stick to it instead of walking away from it as this is a responsibility we must assume for future generations."[23] The US taking the step of withdrawing from the Paris accord, shifting from negative rhetoric to negative action internationally, could have been a turning point in China's adherence to its own commitments,

[20] "China's Changing Attitude to the Norms of International Law and its Global Impact" – Ann Kent in Kerr et al., p.69-70
[21] "China pledges to continue to be 'active player' in climate change talks," *Xinhua*, 12/11/16
[22] "China emerges as global climate leader in wake of Trump's triumph," Isabel Hilton, *The Guardian*, 22/11/16
[23] Xi Jinping – *World Economic Forum*, Davos (17/01/17)

but again the Xi administration appears unmoved. The day before Trump's official statement regarding withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a senior Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, in anticipation of the American announcement, confirmed her country's continued support for the Paris deal, and for the environment more broadly: "China will stay committed to upholding and promoting the global governance on climate change."[24] The US is both de facto and de jure discarding its environmental commitments, yet instead of responding in kind China has barely appeared to miss a step in its continued march towards a low-carbon future. The question is why.

[24] "China sees an opportunity to lead as Trump withdraws from Paris. But will it?" Benjamin Haas, *The Guardian*, 02/06/17

Chapter 2: The Domestic Sphere

2.1 All Talk?

Cynics might argue that this apparent discursive support for their existing environmental obligations is just rhetoric by the Chinese, and that making an effort to enforce and actually meet those obligations is another matter entirely. The argument goes that they have no intention of harming their own traditionally understood sense of economic self-interest, but can boost their international reputation at no cost by committing to long term, unenforceable targets. This underrates the ability of discourse to constrain behaviour even in social environments as contested as international society, and ignores the fact that Chinese climate reality will eventually bump up against the government's climate rhetoric domestically if they do not take serious mitigating action, but it is important to at least point out "the perils of confusing policy pronouncement with policy implementation."[25] China has a relatively poor track record of enforcing environmental standards. In late 2015 *The Guardian* reported that the amount of illegal timber flowing across the border from Myanmar into China, largely due to Chinese logging operations, had grown back to peak levels seen in 2006 before a crackdown.[26] Many of these logging companies have "close government links" despite these forests being "supposedly protected from logging,"[27] suggesting a willingness to act hypocritically on the environment in pursuit of economic development. The Myanmar case is one part of a broader trend which has seen China shift domestic logging operations overseas as far afield as Gabon in response to catastrophic flooding caused by deforestation in places like the headwaters of the Yangtze River.[28] Environmentalists might reasonably be cynical about a so-called commitment to climate mitigation which entails domestic reforestation in concert with industrial harvesting of tropical forests abroad, but this is an unfortunate loophole that will

[25] Bryant, p.357-58
[26] "Surge in illegal logging by Chinese in Myanmar alarms activists," Tom Phillips, *The Guardian*, 17/09/15
[27] Kurlantzick, p.152
[28] Shapiro, p.43

always exist in a world economy of global production chains combined with a national targets-based international response like the Paris Agreement. There are still many purely domestic failings in environmental enforcement in China, as when a rare critical local government document lamented the "insufficient environmental law enforcement" which lead to "illegal discharge of wastewater" and the criminal deterioration of water quality in Guangdong.[29]

However, there are signs that the government is at least making a genuine effort to tighten environmental rules within the country, suggesting it is trying to clamp down on breaches of standards. In 2014 China changed its domestic environmental law for the first time since 1989: this revision "offers more leeway to environmental departments in punishing polluters and gives them legal authority to seize facilities and impart stricter penalties."[30] This was followed by an amendment in 2015 which "significantly increased the accountability of polluters and gave regulators new tools of enforcement."[31] Even if the central government is only making these regulatory improvements for appearance's sake and does not expect them to have any impact on events on the ground, providing administrators with more tools in their armoury against polluters increases the likelihood of the bureaucracy using those tools, whether or not they are asked to do so by central government. In any case, there are also examples of organisational as well as legal improvements around enforcement, most recently with the founding of an environmental police force in Beijing.[32] Whilst officers walking around the city fining citizens for open-air barbecues seems unlikely to solve Beijing's air pollution problem on its own, it is again a crucial sign of intent. In terms of international financial commitments to climate mitigation, China confirmed in the wake of US withdrawal from the Paris accord that it would continue to honour the $3.1 billion pledge it made through the South-South Cooperation on Climate Change, and may even add another

[29] Foshan, p.30-32
[30] "China Revises Environmental Law," Rebecca Valli, *Voice of America*, 25/04/14
[31] Guo et al., p.550
[32] "China to launch 'environmental police' force," Al Jazeera, 08/01/17

billion dollars.[33] These are not the actions of a state which only intends to make rhetorical commitments to protecting the environment.

2.2 Agency Beyond Central Government: Anti-Environment

Another way a divergence between rhetoric and implementation might occur is if the Chinese central government does not have full control over domestic affairs despite wanting to enforce environmental standards. China's authoritarian regime makes it tempting to portray the central government as controlling everything that happens in the country like a puppeteer, but in reality it does "not readily conform to any caricature one might be tempted to draw of an authoritarian government that can undertake sweeping change simply by fiat."[34] There are a range of institutional forces operating against increased environmental protection: most local government officials are still "focused on keeping up growth rates,"[35] whether out of habit or because they still feel incentivised to do so by their superiors. Given the tension between unrestrained growth and the maintenance of environmental standards it is no surprise this results in bureaucratic concern for nature falling by the wayside. While this may be changing, in the past that drive for untrammelled growth has gone right to the top of the hierarchy, with pro-development forces operating "through larger, better-funded government agencies headed by officials close to the top leaders."[36] Li and Chan demonstrate that small and medium-sized state-owned enterprises (SOEs) tend to have particularly poor emissions outcomes, "most likely due to their ability to resist regulation with the help of the local officials."[37] This example suggests dissonance within the different levels of government, though to what extent these local officials are responding to mixed signals and incentives from Beijing is unclear. Even the central government itself has to deal with

[33] "China's perspective on the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement," Qi Ye, *Brookings*, 29/06/17
[34] Heikkila, p.44
[35] Kurlantzick, p.163-64
[36] Gurtov, p.84
[37] Li and Chan, p.261

economic actors pressuring them into softening environmental regulations, most notably the giant state-owned energy companies which have close links with senior Communist Party officials.[38] While there are clearly hurdles to the smooth introduction of climate-friendly policies in China, there are also forces working in favour of climate mitigation which must be taken into account when assessing China's actions.

2.3 Agency Beyond Central Government: Pro-Environment

2.3.1 Structural Factors

There is an argument that because the Chinese economy is already moving away from manufacturing, which has high energy inputs per unit of output, to services, with low energy inputs,[39] China will be able to meet its climate commitments made thus far with little further interference in the economy or loss of competitiveness. This would mean it has no reason to follow the US in forsaking its environmental obligations, because continued commitment to them does not harm its economic interests relative to the US or to any other national competitor. The US has a highly advanced economy which removes its opportunity to benefit from the same structural shift, but China can exploit the fact that having "a post-industrialised, service economy will help control carbon dioxide emissions."[40] This perspective does downplay the very real trade-off which still exists between development and sustainability: Chinese emissions are still increasing, though they are expected to peak by 2030, and Fang and Yang argue that just because China has great scope for productivity improvement given its energy inefficiency and dependence on manufacturing, this "by no means impl[ies] that the chronic environmental problems can be solved xenogenetically."[41] In other words, the usual, national path of

[38] "China emerges as global climate leader in wake of Trump's triumph," Isabel Hilton, *The Guardian*, 22/11/16
[39] "Emissions and economic development," by Peter Sheehan and Fiona Sun, in Song and Woo, p.398
[40] "Understanding China's Climate Change Commitment," Xu Yuan, *East Asia Forum*, 11/08/16
[41] "The political economy of emissions reduction in China," by Cai Fang and Du Yang, in Song and Woo, p.239

economic 'modernisation' will not be enough for China to meet its climate commitments. Nevertheless, the morphing Chinese economy raises interesting questions about which forces are dictating the direction of travel and whether, if the Communist Party is more vulnerable to non-state actor pressure than it has been in the past, it may actually favour the realisation of climate targets China has committed to.

The relationship between state and market in China has evolved significantly over the last few decades. While the "ongoing centrality of the state and state-owned or state-backed enterprises" still justifies categorising the Chinese political economy as "state-corporatist,"[42] there are signs that the domestic balance of power has shifted subtly towards private enterprise, or at least market logic. The case of coal provides a useful illustration. Coal is currently responsible for around 70 percent of China's electricity supply, but its consumption has fallen for three years in a row, including by 4.7 percent last year alone.[43] In the context of this paper it would be tempting to put this down to the Chinese state's environmental strategy. In fact, it can just as plausibly be explained in terms of the profit-maximising pursuit of efficiency. The coal industry is weighed down by overcapacity, with the country producing "almost 3.5 billion tons of coal each year, far more than it needs."[44] Zhao points out that "in today's China, most state industries have gone bankrupt and many workers have been laid off. The social status of the workers whom the CCP supposedly represents has sharply declined, whereas foreign and joint ventures and private businesses in China have boomed."[45] It appears the state is being forced to respond to the lack of competitiveness of most SOEs, recognising it no longer has the ability to control the economy exactly as it pleases. For example, the central government has largely backed away from attempting to directly manage the closure of overcapacity in coal and steel and has instead shifted more

[42] Hochstetler and Kostka, p.77
[43] "China's environmental clean-up to have big impact on industry," Alan Clark, *Financial Times*, 22/05/17
[44] "Environmental moves mean blue skies for China investors," Edmund Harriss, *CNBC*, 13/03/17
[45] Zhao, p.426

towards the use of market mechanisms,[46] despite the inevitably more intense social dislocations that will result. These mechanisms will help China reach its emissions targets, not because the market actors cutting excess coal capacity care about the environment but because making energy industries more efficient will also make them more profitable. Where the state may stay its hand in sacking huge numbers of coal miners across the country, fearing social unrest, market actors will have no such compunction.

This domestic liberalisation of markets is taking place in the context of a China which is becoming ever more integrated into the global economy. At the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, and shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, China formally designated itself as a market economy.[47] The results of the shift from state socialism to state capitalism are clear today: "China is extremely open for such a big economy. Its share of world trade increased eightfold within twenty five years after its economic reforms."[48] This opening up to the forces of global capitalism has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, but it has also meant increasing competition which often requires cuts in welfare spending.[49] Coal miners being kept in work by the state at a volume beyond the number required to meet market demand can be considered a form of welfare spending, and by withdrawing from these socialist policies the Chinese central government is proving it cannot ignore the competitiveness of its industries in the face of global markets. There are two important points regarding China's climate commitments in the context of losing a certain amount of economic control to a combination of domestic and foreign market forces: the first is that in this instance, these forces are making it easier for China to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement because of their more relentless pursuit of productivity, and the more efficient energy usage and investment that entails. The second is that just

[46] "China backs away from using central government to close coal mines," Lucy Hornby, *Financial Times*, 08/03/17
[47] Brady, p.439
[48] Weede, p.209
[49] Holton, p.111

because this shift is environmentally beneficial in this case, does not mean it will be in the future; losing economic control will make it harder to intervene if market actors, in search of profit, start taking actions which undermine Chinese climate policy instead of support it. Still, the decline of the Chinese state relative to markets should not be exaggerated. It is still immensely powerful and has shown, as in the case of domestic solar manufacturers, that it is willing to intervene in global renewable energy markets[50] to shield its industries from the disruptive impacts of external economic forces.

2.3.2 Other Domestic Actors

Beyond markets, there are a range of actors working within China who are favourable to meeting climate targets. The creation and further empowerment of state institutions set up to protect, or at least manage, nature, what Foot calls the "new environmental bureaucracies,"[51] such as the cabinet-level Ministry of Environmental Protection,[52] at least to some extent set China on a green path. These institutions have even had star leaders such as Qu Geping, who played an important role in tightening both environmental laws and their enforcement.[53] Bureaucracy often displays certain pathologies, like the organisational compulsion to endure (no organisation is likely to willingly pursue policies which would logically result in its self-destruction, even if such an outcome would benefit the common good), meaning the employees of these bureaucracies are likely to keep emphasising the importance of environmental issues even if the central government wanted to reverse its policies. While local administrations have sometimes proven to be anchors against implementing central government climate policy fully, in other cases they have shown green energy leadership before any pressure from Beijing.[54] Another node of pro-environmental action could be cities. Heikkila suggests that one of the

[50] Hochstetler and Kostka, p.89-90
[51] "Chinese power and the idea of a responsible state" – Rosemary Foot in Zhang and Austin, p.36
[52] Shapiro, p.68
[53] Shapiro, p.68
[54] Hochstetler and Kostka, p.85

main predictors of a Chinese city having a good environmental track record is being "tightly integrated into the international community,"[55] and as China continues to open up both economically and culturally, its cities may become more forceful advocates of climate friendly policies in their own right. In May 2017, Qingdao became the tenth Chinese city to join the C40, the most prominent international megacity network working together to tackle climate change,[56] suggesting these hubs of people and capital are already stepping forward to take responsibility.

Another group of stakeholders who pressure the government to pursue more sustainable development are NGOs: over the last couple of decades there has been an "emergence of environmental non-governmental organisations that represent an important development in China's civil society."[57] In 2006 the All China Environmental Foundation calculated that there were 2,768 environmental NGOs operating in the country, and events like the '26 Degree Campaign,' which saved 350,000-550,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide by raising awareness about excessive air conditioner usage,[58] have shown they can make an impact. However, the importance of NGOs in shaping Chinese government policy should not be overstated, especially once we accept that usually "NGO inclusion does not come at the expense of state centrality; rather it is to the advantage of states."[59] Until the early 1990s no environmental NGOs existed in China. This all changed with the 1992 UN conference in Rio de Janeiro, when Chinese representatives on climate policy were found to be embarrassingly ignorant of the issues. The government observed the benefits reaped by other countries in terms of expertise through the wielding of popular participation and civil society,[60] and resolved to foster its own version. The first Chinese ENGO, Friends of Nature, was set up less than two years later. As with so much in

[55] Heikkila, p.35
[56] "Chinese city of Qingdao joins C40, affirms commitment to tackling climate change," *C40 Blog*, 04/05/17
[57] Heikkila, p.36
[58] Schroeder, p.517
[59] Raustiala, p.720
[60] Wong, p.48

China, environmental activism only emerged in an organised way because the central government wanted it to. Moreover, while foreign environmental NGOs operating in China may be more independent of the state than their domestic counterparts, any influence they have is being undermined by a 2017 law which subjects them to much closer government scrutiny.[61] The bottom line according to some scholars is that "green NGOs have not significantly influenced the government's policies related to the environment,"[62] presumably because the government so strongly influences *their* policies. Ultimately, while of course China is subject to a certain amount of institutional path dependence, economic evolution and diffusion of power, the country remains remarkably unitary compared to most other states around the world, especially considering the size of its population. Central government still dominates, and while the claim that it acts "as though there were no such things as inertia, friction or tension"[63] is hyperbolic, Beijing remains in a strong position to overcome such inertia when it arises. We must therefore look beyond non-state actor pressure if we are to fully explain China's environmental commitment.

2.4 Economic and Political Opportunities of Green Technology

China is investing hugely in green technology, partly because of the environmental benefits but also because there are economic opportunities in doing so. There is an assumption that at least in the long run most countries will simply have to cut emissions significantly, and this gives possible first-mover advantage to pioneers of technology that enables those states to do so: "China plans to be the supplier of low-carbon goods to a carbon-constrained world."[64] In the pursuit of this plan, China has become "the world's largest market for hydropower, nuclear, wind and solar energy," and has a particular advantage

[61] "Why foreign NGOs are struggling with new Chinese law," Nectar Gan, *South China Morning Post*, 13/06/17
[62] Wong, p.54
[63] Pye, p.210
[64] "China emerges as global climate leader in wake of Trump's triumph," Isabel Hilton, *The Guardian*, 22/11/16

in wind turbines and solar panels.[65] To provide a few numbers, in 2015 China invested slightly over $100 billion in renewable energy and "installed half of the world's new wind power,"[66] with plans to spend $361 billion on renewable energy over the next five years up to 2020.[67] These investments will pay off not only by easing the pollution problem across China and bridging the gap between its current economy and the economy it requires to meet its international climate commitments, but when viewed in tandem with its increasing support for free trade policies like 'One Belt, One Road' will serve a national economic agenda by creating new export markets for its green technology. These markets are set to expand significantly in the coming decades and are "highly likely to be very important parts of the global energy mix by the middle of this century."[68] While there are concerns about social unrest caused by restructuring the economy, with the number of industrial strikes and protests across China more than doubling between 2014 and 2015 to almost three thousand,[69] this pressure should be eased by an estimated thirteen million new jobs in renewable energy by 2020.[70] Overall, the green investment strategy seems an intelligent way of easing the tension between economic development and sustainability. In conjunction with the structural shifts from manufacturing to services and towards increased industrial efficiency already discussed, as well as the positive impact reduced air pollution is projected to have on worker health and productivity of major crops,[71] it may even make these two goals compatible as happened in the case of the USA and the Clean Air Act.[72]

There are also political opportunities contained in any economic rebalancing, including towards sustainability. Raymond Bryant explored the case of Myanmar in the mid-1990s, arguing that the

[65] "Understanding China's Climate Change Commitment," Xu Yuan, *East Asia Forum*, 11/08/16
[66] "China emerges as global climate leader in wake of Trump's triumph," Isabel Hilton, *The Guardian*, 22/11/16
[67] "China to plow $361 billion into renewable fuel by 2020," *Reuters*, 05/01/17
[68] "Will China lead on climate change as green technology booms?" Channing Arndt, *The Conversation*, 21/11/16
[69] "Labour unrest grows in China, even in the historic heartlands of revolution," Hannah Beech, *TIME*, 10/04/16
[70] "China to plow $361 billion into renewable fuel by 2020," *Reuters*, 05/01/17
[71] "Benefits to Human Health and Agricultural Productivity of Reduced Air Pollution," by Yu Lei, in Nielsen and Ho, p.324
[72] Guo et al., p.560

military junta then in complete control of the country had "embraced the concept of sustainable development in the belief that such a strategy…[held] important political benefits, rather than as a result of concern about environmental degradation per se."[73] In the Burmese case the government found that control over the country's natural resources, particularly its forests, could be exploited to tighten its grip on power. China does have a track record of using environmental protection as a justification for consolidating its authority, as when forcing traditional nomadic societies to "sedentarise."[74] In the case of provincial green investment the Communist Party has the opportunity to mimic the strategy of the Burmese government, albeit with man-made technology rather than natural resources, in a province such as Tibet which has far more sun[75] than it does coal.[76] As far back as 2003 the Chinese government had already pumped RMB 22 billion into eco-environmental protection projects in Tibet.[77] While political control may not be the primary motivation for such action, a possible ancillary benefit of investing so much money into this particularly incendiary region could be to bind some Tibetan citizens' livelihoods to government largesse, subtly fragmenting any widespread resistance to Beijing, as well as driving another manifestation of Chinese sovereignty into the minds of Tibetans.

2.5 Domestic Legitimacy

Environmental degradation is now a critical problem within China; it has even been called "China's Achilles heel."[78] Two of the most basic concerns of any government are likely to be that its citizens have access to breathable air and drinkable water, critical material foundations for the growth of any society or economy. According to the World Health Organisation, "several hundred thousand

[73] Bryant, p.342
[74] Shapiro, p.20
[75] Shapiro, p.66
[76] "China's Great Coal Migration," Richard Martin, *Fortune*, 11/07/14
[77] "Ecological Improvement and Environmental Protection in Tibet," State Council of China (March 2003)
[78] Gurtov, p.83

[Chinese] people die prematurely from illnesses caused by particulate matter in the air"[79] every year. The International Energy Agency argues that the number is closer to one million people per year.[80] Some scholars have even claimed that "air quality has become the number one issue for social instability in China."[81] Surveys carried out by the Pew Research Centre do suggest a serious and worsening problem: from 2008 to 2013 the proportion of Chinese people considering air pollution a 'very big problem' rose from 31% to 47%, with the equivalent statistic for water pollution showing a jump from 28% to 40%.[82] Incidentally, 2013 was a particularly damaging year, with the Air Quality Index peaking at over 800 (301-500 is the highest category of risk on the spectrum) and air pollution being responsible for a third of all deaths in China that year.[83] In 2016, Pew also found that 50% of the Chinese polled claimed they would be willing to see a reduction in economic growth if it meant getting air pollution under control, compared to only 24% of people unprepared to make such a trade-off.[84]

Even with no pollution whatsoever China's demographics would put it at risk: it has almost a quarter of the world's population, but only 5 percent of its water resources and 7 percent of its arable land.[85] However, drinkable water as a proportion of the water supply is down to roughly thirty percent in most settlements across the country[86] and the entire Pearl River system is dangerously polluted.[87] This is not a new problem; indeed, "China first adopted a sustainable development strategy in 1994…[because of] degrading water and air qualities,"[88] but the severity of the problem is only getting

[79] Gurtov, p.80
[80] "China's smog knocks 2 years off life expectancy: International Energy Agency," Li Jing, *South China Morning Post*, 30/06/16
[81] Teng and Jotzo, p.48
[82] "Environmental concerns on the rise in China," *Pew Research Centre*, 19/09/13
[83] "The Uninhabitable Earth," David Wallace-Wells, *New York Magazine*, 09/07/17
[84] "Chinese public sees more powerful role in world, names U.S. as top threat," Richard Wike and Bruce Stokes, *Pew Research Centre*, 05/10/16
[85] "Water: Quenching the Thirst for Security?" John Brandon, *The Asia Foundation*, 22/06/11
[86] Gurtov, p.84
[87] Heikkila, p.41
[88] Guo et al., p.50

worse. On the surface it might seem like the internal ubiquity and hegemony of the Communist Party should prevent this type of issue from being a decisive factor in core national policy decisions: surely an authoritarian regime does not need to be as responsive to its citizens as a democratic equivalent would have to be? This view represents a misunderstanding of the relationship the government has with the Chinese people.

The Chinese government's tacit deal with its citizenry, especially since 1980s talk of "wuzhi wenming jianshe," or "material civilisation,"[89] has been that people's living standards will keep improving in exchange for forfeiting direct political control. In the West there can sometimes be a perception of the party as a brutally repressive regime which retains its monopoly on the political levers of power through fear and coercion. This is hugely simplistic, as it has long been understood that even authoritarian regimes require consent as well as coercion to stay in power.[90] The party certainly does use repressive tactics to quash any serious dissent, but this can distract from the fact that a lot of people in the country are perfectly happy with the job the government does. In fact, government approval ratings in China are significantly higher than they are in most Western countries, with a recent survey carried out by Harvard's Anthony Saich showing a more than ninety percent approval rating for the central government.[91] If legitimacy involves "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society,"[92] the Chinese government appears to be just as legitimate in the eyes of its people as, say, the US government is, and probably much more so.

However, the extent of state control over most aspects of life in China fosters a belief that the government is responsible for fixing many of the problems that arise, making popular dissent much

[89] Brady, p.435
[90] Keck and Sikkink, p.206
[91] "The critical masses," *The Economist*, 11/04/15
[92] Lipset, p.86

more threatening to the Communist Party than it would be to ruling parties in other countries with less dominant state apparatuses.[93] This makes the party very sensitive to maintaining high levels of domestic legitimacy and can see it act heavy-handedly when dealing with social unrest, as happened at a protest against air pollution in Chengdu in 2016.[94] This sensitivity has international implications, as it means that "the most important factor in driving China's foreign policy is the regime's efforts at self-preservation."[95] In other words, behaviour on the international stage, whether a decision to go to war or commit to a multilateral climate agreement, is guided first and foremost by domestic calculation. There is broader theoretical support for this interpretation of China's actions, most notably Krasner's argument that "rulers are likely to be more responsive to domestic material and ideational incentives than international ones."[96]

The emphasis on what is sometimes called "performance legitimacy"[97] is deeply rooted in the historical relationship between Chinese state and society, with even ancient figures like the Duke of Zhou seeing King Wen's mandate of heaven as conditional on his "virtuous conduct."[98] The dilemma for the Chinese government is that it is now caught between two problems which are negatively correlated: slowing economic growth, and the slowdown in living standards improvements which come from that, and extreme pollution which affects hundreds of millions of its people daily. Both issues damage its legitimacy, but it is not easy to mitigate one without making the other worse. While the government's main, perhaps even singular, focus in the past has been maximizing economic growth to retain domestic legitimacy – suggested by its reluctance to make any environmental commitments at the Copenhagen

[93] Zhao, p.428
[94] "China riot police seal off city centre after smog protesters put masks on statues," Benjamin Haas, *The Guardian*, 12/12/16
[95] Lai, p.163
[96] Krasner, p.41-42
[97] Zhao, p.418
[98] Confucius, 'Junshi' chapter

summit at all[99] – the pollution crisis appears to be fundamentally rebalancing those calculations. Environmental protests have been increasing at a steep annual rate of 29 percent since 1996,[100] presenting a level of social disquiet which is impossible to ignore. The actions expected from a state to gain it legitimation by its population are not static; other states have had to evolve from being expected to provide only security from foreign attack to providing their citizens with security from risk of "long-term environmental degradation, of hunger, of shortages of oil or electricity, of unemployment and penury and even perhaps of preventable disease."[101] Rising expectations are also being fuelled by a growing middle class whose newfound affluence is fuelling a greater confidence in voicing dissatisfaction than many citizens have shown in the past.[102] Particularly as China integrates both economically and culturally with the rest of the world, and despite its extraordinary track record of lifting citizens out of poverty in the roughly three decades from 1981 to 2012,[103] the Communist Party may find a reliance on performance legitimacy more precarious as its resources are pulled in more directions than ever before by the evolving expectations of its people.

2.6 Existing Environmental Norms in China

Domestic pressure for climate action could also be heightened by cultural antipathy towards extreme environmental destruction. These norms are unlikely to be the decisive factor in Chinese government policy but they may operate at the fringes to create a norm environment which is more receptive to and supportive of a green shift than would otherwise be the case. Scholars working on international norms have noted how "new ideas are more likely to be influential if they fit well with existing ideas and ideologies."[104] Given the link between the domestic and the international, adherence

[99] Kerry Brown – "China 2020: international relations," in Brown, p.37-38
[100] Shapiro, p.10
[101] Strange, p.33
[102] "The Domestic Sources of China's Foreign Policy and Diplomacy" – Zhu Liqun in Kerr et al., p.122
[103] "China contributes to over 70 percent of global poverty reduction," *Xinhua*, 27/12/16
[104] Keck and Sikkink, p.204

to climate commitments like those in the Paris Agreement becomes a more favourable option for the central government if green norms already exist inside China than if they do not. Taoism, one of the 'three teachings' of Chinese culture alongside Confucianism and Buddhism, "emphasises the importance of harmony between humankind and nature…[because] conformance to the natural world is an intrinsic element of the path to enlightenment."[105] There are examples of more localised norms favouring environmental preservation too, such as the use of deeply held beliefs about the importance of the "Mother River of Foshan" in successfully justifying large scale spending on a river restoration project.[106]

However, the Cultural Revolution did great damage to traditional conceptions of the human symbiosis with nature, particularly because Mao did not only try to eviscerate all worldviews but his own, but actively insisted that "man must conquer nature."[107] Even now, despite being confronted by the full consequences of that mentality in the air they breathe and the water they drink, surveys suggest that "the Chinese favour the transformation of nature"[108] rather than its conservation, a stance that assumes the environmental issues facing China can be solved by technological advancement and minimising human dependence on nature rather than by a rediscovery of more Taoist, symbiotic solutions. Even tangentially related norms, such as the "conspicuous consumption" that pervades Chinese society,[109] can actively operate against pro-environmental impulses. Even so, there is still a chance that newly constructed norms like the idea of the Chinese embarking on an "ecological civilisation" process,[110] an ideal put forward by the Communist Party at their most recent National Congress in 2012, could resonate with citizens in such a way as to push their identities towards a greater

[105] Heikkila, p.38
[106] Heikkila, p.37
[107] Wong, p.44
[108] Wong, p.44
[109] Shapiro, p.11
[110] Constitution of the Communist Party of China, Eighteenth National Congress, 14/11/12

valuing of the environment, and in turn change the way the government has to respond to those identities to maximise its legitimacy.

Chapter 3: The International Sphere

3.1 Security

The realist school of international relations depicts world politics as a self-help, anarchic system in which states pursue survival through the accumulation of material capabilities.[111] For a realist, then, perhaps the most plausible internationally-situated explanation for China's continued commitment to more sustainable economic development would be security, particularly energy security. In 2013 China overtook the US to become the largest net oil importer in the world,[112] which makes the continued functioning of the country's economy much more dependent than it would like on stability in global trade. The government has tried to build close ties with many resource-rich developing states around the world, particularly in Africa. However, these states are often unstable, in many cases exactly because of their resource wealth, and cannot form the core of an essential, long term pillar of national security. Furthermore, the spectre of China's superpower rival rears its head again on this issue: "Beijing believes that it cannot trust the world markets for long term supplies of oil, gas, minerals and other commodities, since the United States controls the global sea lanes and has long-standing relationships with key oil suppliers like Saudi Arabia."[113] If China can win greater energy security it may well consider the sacrificing of a certain amount of economic growth a price worth paying, particularly in the context of the Trump administration's unpredictable, nationalist rhetoric. The other aspect of security is more existential and long term: China almost certainly realises that climate change is a serious threat to its national prosperity and even survival. According to Teng and Jotzo, China's geography makes it highly susceptible to global warming: "the majority of the country's population, economy and urban built structures are located within 200 miles of the eastern coastline," making its environmental policies

[111] Mearsheimer, p.147
[112] "China overtakes US as the biggest importer of oil," *BBC*, 10/10/13
[113] Kurlantzick, p.41

primarily "a risk management strategy for the nation's long-run development."[114] It seems unlikely that any government could avoid discounting the future enough to subjugate more short term interests to such a far-sighted view, though if one could it would probably be the Chinese Communist Party.

3.2 International Reputation

Despite finding that domestic concerns are likely the main motivation of Chinese foreign policy, including in signing and upholding agreements like the one made at the Paris summit, international reputation also plays an important role. Constructivists in the field of IR have long depicted the international system as "a social space, and states as social actors."[115] Indeed, under this interpretation it makes more sense to refer to an international society rather than an international system. Redefining the ontology of global politics in largely ideational rather than material terms[116] makes possible an intriguing explanation of Chinese environmental policy: by standing firm on its climate commitments in the face of US defection, China is attempting to capture the normative high ground from its main rival. By showing "the will to join this environmentally-minded…society of states"[117] and conforming to currently prevalent international norms on environmental issues China is likely to gain moral capital, especially in contrast to a suddenly nationalistic and at times belligerent US administration showing abrasive disregard for those same norms. There have even been serendipitous cases of senior figures in the Communist Party (presumably) unintentionally evoking Trump's rhetoric, and putting the American President's language in even starker contrast as a result: at the National People's Congress in March, Li Keqiang, the Chinese Premier (second only to President Xi Jinping), promised to "make our skies blue

[114] Teng and Jotzo, p.48
[115] Epstein, p.32
[116] Wendt, p.73
[117] Epstein, p.47

again,"[118] a green version of the famous "make America great again" slogan, and without the divisive implications.

In a sense, China's current steadfastness on climate change is likely to be viewed all the more positively by fellow states given "norms in the international system will be less constraining than would be the case in other political settings;"[119] in other words its continued compliance is not being driven by coercion. Of course, it is possible the way other states perceive China and the US does not change much as a result of their opposing positions on the environment. Certain scholars downplay the extent to which international reputation and clout are transferable across different issue-areas,[120] but it is hard to believe there is not at least *some* issue overspill. Erickson, for instance, argues that one of the motivations for states implementing arms export controls is seeking "to signal that they possess the qualities of good international citizens, supporting peace and human rights,"[121] suggesting more general social benefits to states which are likely to transcend narrow issue-areas. China's socially well-received actions on climate change are likely to influence its broader international image beyond the environmental space.

China's focus on building a positive international reputation has not come out of nowhere. It has been a concerted effort over the last two decades at least. Scholars differ on the exact roots of its inception, but the most likely moment of paradigm shift was the mid to late 1990s when Beijing's aggression in response to pro-independence Taiwanese rhetoric resulted in those very same pro-independence leaders being elected, and nearly sparked military conflict between China and the US.[122] Realising both the material risks and reputational damage such face-offs inflicted, China largely traded

[118] "China's environmental clean-up to have big impact on industry," Alan Clark, *Financial Times*, 22/05/17
[119] Krasner, p.6
[120] Baldwin, p.193
[121] Erickson, p.18
[122] Lai, p.165

"belligerence and coercive tactics for patience and moderation,"[123] striving to become a more involved member of the international community by joining "a wide range of international organisations and…[embracing] globalisation and a good number of international norms."[124] China is currently a member of 75 international organisations (including 'observer' and other partial status),[125] is now the largest contributor to peacekeeping forces of the five UN Security Council members[126] and grew from being the fourteenth largest foreign aid donor in 2008 to the sixth largest in 2012, with expectations of further progress.[127]

These kinds of strategies are a fruitful way for a state to build international legitimacy, and ultimately to maximise the chances of getting the outcomes it wants. Joseph Nye argued that building 'soft power' could lessen the need for a state to use more costly means of coercion or material incentives to gain compliance: "if its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow."[128] Other states are likely to respond less positively to a China which carries itself aggressively in the international sphere rather than cooperatively, whether because they expect reduced long run material benefits from engaging with it, because they do not want to appear weak to domestic audiences or simply because state leaders are human too, and therefore emotional rather than perfectly rational.[129] China's dedication to "wooing friends with a subtle, softer approach"[130] reflects an understanding of these social tendencies, and a continued commitment to its international environmental obligations could be seen as a mere extension of this policy. Climate change is a particularly obvious area for China to utilise one of its foreign policy catchphrases: 'win-win,' or 'huli

[123] Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel – "China's New Diplomacy," in Liu, p.392
[124] Lai, p.160
[125] CIA World Factbook – https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2107.html
[126] "China expands UN peacekeeping role as US influence wanes," Lucy Hornby, *Financial Times*, 23/11/16
[127] Kitano and Harada, p.1058
[128] Nye, p.167
[129] "The Question of Emotions and Passions in Mainstream International Relations, and Beyond," by Jean-Marc Coicaud, in Ariffin, p.35
[130] Kurlantzick, p.ix

gongying.' Even if China enjoys relatively greater gains from an environmentally-related deal than its counterparty, it could argue the whole world benefits from lower overall damage to nature. Interestingly, while the new Chinese approach has proved successful in improving relations with other states, citizens of those states can sometimes be a different story. The Pew Research Centre, for example, found that the populations of the United States, Russia, Japan and Germany looked more unfavourably on China in 2014[131] than they did in 2007.[132] What implications this has had for the way these states interact with the Chinese state is unclear, but it would be illuminating to see how these approval ratings are affected by Trump's rise to power and the contrasting Chinese loyalty to multilateral commitments like the Paris Agreement.

It must be underlined that China is almost certainly not taking this gentler, more collaborative approach to global politics for moral reasons. The language used in their INDCs ('Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' under the Paris Agreement) might suggest otherwise, such as by talking about promoting "common development for all human beings,"[133] but this stance is likely to be either largely or entirely the result of self-interested calculation rather than genuine cosmopolitanism. It is even arguable that the Chinese government not focusing on the interests of the Chinese people would be immoral, or at least an abnegation of the state's function, just as economists like Milton Friedman argued that the sole responsibility of a corporation is to its shareholders. That China only transitioned to a 'Peaceful Rise' after more belligerent strategies failed in the 1990s[134] suggests less a reconstitution of identity than a recalibration of image based on self-interest, with academic experts on soft power drafted into the Communist Party's Policy Research Office by Jiang Zemin to oversee the realignment.[135] However, this is perfectly congruent with constructivist theory. Norms are "more functional than

[131] "Chapter 2: China's image," *Pew Research Centre*, 14/07/14
[132] "How the world sees China," Andrew Kohut, *Pew Research Centre*, 11/12/07
[133] https://www.scribd.com/document/270088380/China-s-INDC-in-English
[134] Kurlantzick, p.38
[135] Jain, p.8

ethical;"[136] in other words, whilst they may have ethical roots or elements, the main way norms constrain action in international relations is by shame rather than guilt, by external social sanction possibly connected to material sanction rather than by the internal, self-regulating maintenance of certain standards. We expect too much from international norms if we think they can make states act against what they see as their interests, though they may sometimes have a role in reshaping those interests. According to this view, China cultivates "an international image of a responsible cooperative power"[137] because it sees the global normative framework within which it is embedded as rewarding such behaviour, and expects to gain material benefits from this reputational advancement in the long run. It may even discern domestic advantages in a positive global image, particularly given the domestic collectivist norms which make Chinese people more "likely to subject both their personal honour and disgrace to that of the country."[138] If national pride is so important, the Communist Party is likely to boost its own popular legitimacy by taking actions which enhance China's international reputation.

3.2.1 The State of International Environmentalism

An attempt to secure normative credit through international engagement on climate issues will only be successful so long as the social framework of international society continues to judge those issues as important. The ideational structure of world politics can change, and there is no guarantee it will change for the 'better.' If all countries other than China decided that appropriate behaviour for states was to pursue all possible economic growth regardless of environmental impact, the Middle Kingdom's green policies would bring it no reputational benefit whatsoever, at least from states. While China's renewable energy industry is currently not just a source of hard but also soft power,[139] citizens in countries around the world, particularly in the West, have been witnessing a "curious disappearance of

[136] Epstein, p.33
[137] "Better than Power: 'International Status' in Chinese Foreign Policy" – Yong Deng in Deng and Wang, p.59
[138] Li, p.358
[139] Jonathan Watts – "China's environment in 2020," in Brown, p.122

climate change from the political agenda."[140] While of course the ever worsening condition of the environment should make it impossible to ignore, currently stagnating living standards and economic development in the West are threatening to relegate climate change down the list of priorities. If this happens in enough countries, especially if they are powerful ones, the reputational benefits China expected from standing firm on its environmental obligations may dissipate through the radical evolution of the international social structure. As Jeffrey Checkel points out, "material structures…are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted;"[141] having lots of green technology may only be 'good' if other people and states think it is 'good.'

However, the recent G20 summit in Hamburg provided a vivid demonstration of quite how alone the US now stands on climate change, and may have usefully served to reinfuse green issues with momentum that appeared to be fading. Rather than be cowed by US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, state after state has reaffirmed its commitment to tackling environmental issues, and in doing so has strengthened the purchase of pro-climate norms in the international social structure. From Germany,[142] to France,[143] to Canada,[144] to India,[145] leaders from the grouping of the largest economies in the world promised to respect the Paris Agreement. The G20 Leaders' Declaration both noted US withdrawal from the Paris accord and underlined its irreversibility in the eyes of all other G20 members.[146] Some scholars may criticise this essay's focus on states over non-state actors in assessing the current shape of the global environmental norm context, but Wendt is correct to call states the trees

[140] "The curious disappearance of climate change, from Brexit to Berlin," Andrew Simms, *The Guardian*, 30/03/17
[141] Checkel (1998), p.326
[142] "Merkel to put climate change at centre of G20 talks after Trump's Paris pullout," Agencies in Berlin, *The Guardian*, 29/06/17
[143] "France, Italy, Germany defend Paris Accord and say it cannot be renegotiated," *Reuters*, 01/06/17
[144] "McKenna, Trudeau say Canada 'won't walk away' from fight against climate change," Alex Ballingall, *The Star*, 05/06/17
[145] "Trump climate deal: Modi vows to go beyond Paris accord," *BBC*, 03/06/17
[146] G20 Leaders' Declaration, p.10

in the forest of world politics.[147] They remain the prime actors in international relations and it is correct to attach great significance to their actions. Such global discursive support from states for multilateral action on climate change ensures China will certainly gain reputationally for standing firm on the Paris Agreement.

3.2.2 Great Power Status?

The other important question to explore around China's pursuit of international reputation is, why. What is the ultimate objective? As mentioned previously, reputational clout could translate into material benefits such as greater receptivity by other states to Chinese investments, as well as ideational benefits such as a greater influence over international norms. However, it seems likely that China's aspirations in its building of soft power go beyond that. Its long term goal is to recapture its historical position as a great power, or *daguo*, in the world. As recently as the early nineteenth century China controlled roughly a third of world GDP.[148] It sees the century of shame which ended in 1949 as an aberration from its natural role as a, if not the, dominant state. Its colonisation by an array of different powers left deep scars in the Chinese psyche which even in recent decades has hampered the attainment of this dominant role, but according to certain scholars the early 2000s may have seen a shift from this "long-held victim mentality (*shouhaizhe xintai*)" to the "great power mentality (*daguo xintai*)"[149] required for China's ascent of the final summit in world politics, superpower status. There has been a realisation amongst Chinese leaders that if the country is to reach these heights "material power alone" will be insufficient; it must be coupled with "greater international legitimacy,"[150] which is where continued commitment to environmental standards comes in.

[147] Wendt, p.9
[148] https://infogr.am/Share-of-world-GDP-throughout-history , 1820
[149] Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel – "China's New Diplomacy," in Liu, p.395
[150] "Better than Power: 'International Status' in Chinese Foreign Policy" – Yong Deng in Deng and Wang, p.62

Until recently, the key Chinese mantra for its international affairs was *tao guang yang hui* ('bide our time and build up our capabilities'), just as when it was first introduced by Deng Xiaoping, but the view inside China is changing with "many policymakers and opinion formers want[ing] a higher profile, something more appropriate to China's current situation."[151] Despite these growing ambitions there appeared to be little chance of drastically altering perceptions of China in a US, and certainly West, dominated world order. Who gains legitimacy in international society depends heavily on who has the power to shape the norms which guide state interaction, so given American wariness of China it seemed like the rising dragon was destined to face severe institutional headwinds in its pursuit of international reputation. However, the Trump administration's aggressive and shameless nationalism has provided China with a golden opportunity to expedite its rise to great power status.

One possibility in the wake of Trump's victory was that the nationalist and unilateral stance of his administration, coupled with America's continued position as the only world superpower, would prompt a reversion in the international normative structure back towards a more Hobbesian state of international affairs from its current, Lockean position,[152] from mere rivalry back to the enmity of the pre-War years. Instead what appears to have happened so far is that international norms have remained steady in supporting both environmentalism and multilateralism, the two pillars of the Paris Agreement, and the US is being widely portrayed as a pariah, as the loose cannon in a new G19+1.[153] The Chinese are already framing environmental action as the "obligation of a responsible large country,"[154] implicitly contrasting their own good behaviour with America's abandonment of this important global issue. It is possible that Xi Jinping's Davos speech in January, with his staunch defence of not just meeting responsibilities on climate change but also on supporting the global economic order, represents China's

[151] Kerry Brown – "China 2020: international relations," in Brown, p.21
[152] Wendt, p.279
[153] "G20 Hamburg: Leaders fail to bridge Trump climate chasm," *BBC*, 08/07/17
[154] The National Development and Reform Commission, p.64

gambit for a seat at the very top level, namely evolving from a "norm-taker" into a "norm-maker."[155] Many scholars, particularly writing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, assumed that the world would shift from US hegemony to much more diffused multipolarity, but this was based on an international system with no alternative leader[156] to the United States. China may not quite be ready yet, but its rise has been astonishing indeed. If enough states around the world are alienated by Trump at the same time as China finally steps forward to offer a possible alternative as primary guardian of the global political economy, there could be a remarkable shift in the ideational framework of the society of states not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union.

3.3 Socialisation

An internationally-derived logic for China sticking to its environmental commitments may go beyond attempts to win reputational advantage in the social structure of states for instrumental purposes: China may in fact have been socialised by the international community to value climate mitigation as a good in itself, having its identity reconstituted and shifting from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness on the issue. For the purposes of this paper, socialisation refers only to what Checkel calls Type II socialisation, or a situation in which agents "adopt the interests, or even possibly the identity, of the community of which they are a part."[157] What he calls Type I socialisation, or an agent "acquiring the knowledge that enables them to act in accordance with expectations – irrespective of whether they like the role or agree with it,"[158] is compatible with China instrumentally pursuing its interests through conforming to international environmental norms, as discussed above. In that case, the incentives for China may be ideational rather than material, but they are still exogenous. Li shows that, in certain instances, even if IGO (intergovernmental organisation) membership is

[155] Acharya, p.73
[156] Rodrik, p.71
[157] Checkel (2005), p.804
[158] Checkel (2005), p.804

undesirable on a purely material basis, the social costs involved in not joining may sway China's calculations and prompt its participation.[159] This is an excellent example of Type I socialisation, and demonstrates that China does indeed respond to normative as well as material constraints. However, the rest of this section will be concerned only with Type II socialisation, namely conforming to environmental norms because interaction with international society has prompted identity change.

A range of academic works have been written on socialisation with varying degrees of success in identifying strong evidence. This is unsurprising because as a phenomenon it is extremely hard to prove. Price shows how NGOs in the 1990s persuaded states to disavow landmines as an acceptable tool of war, implying that sometimes states are not just "receptive to being taught about what is…useful," but also what is "appropriate."[160] The landmine case demonstrates that it is at least possible for a state to take action for externally-sourced but internally-sustained, moral reasons despite believing this action to be detrimental to its interests as constituted at that time. It is therefore worth asking whether something similar could be happening in the case of Chinese environmental policy. Some academics are convinced "the foundations for environmental protection as a policy priority within China stem in large measure from China's participation in international forums over several decades,"[161] which would suggest a degree of internalisation of external norms. However, the possibility of an instrumental relationship with these forums cannot be ignored. In the case of international peacekeeping, for example, China has gradually changed its position to accept "missions that are far more intrusive than traditional peacekeeping" but has insisted on the immutability of "the host country's consent"[162] in return. This suggests an aggregative, interests-based negotiation rather than a deliberative, identity-shifting dialogue. Beyond the state as a unitary actor, opportunities for socialisation exist at the

[159] Li, p.371
[160] Price, p.621
[161] Heikkila, p.50
[162] Li, p.316

individual administrative level too, particularly when considering that most "current senior and midlevel diplomats…hold graduate degrees from European and American universities."[163] Finally, normative pressure may be applied to a government indirectly via the socialisation of a large portion of its citizenry: evidence of high Chinese popular support for multilateral solutions to climate change,[164] as well as an increase in more general approval for the United Nations from 39% in 2013 to 54% in 2016,[165] suggests international organisations and frameworks have more legitimacy within China than can reasonably have been expected to emerge through internal factors alone.

International socialisation of China may be a marginal factor in this case, but not a crucial one. In maintaining its environmental standards it appears to be pursuing relatively established interests rather than imbuing the Paris Agreement and other international mechanisms with a deeply felt, taken-for-granted legitimacy which ought to be obeyed for normative reasons. For any state, "the international system is an environment in which the logics of consequences dominate the logics of appropriateness,"[166] yet perhaps for China even more so than its rivals. Scholars have called China "the high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world,"[167] and though the Chinese conceived of 'national power' rather normatively under Mao, post-Mao there was a shift towards "a more comprehensive and synthetic approach…[focusing on] how to make China rich and strong."[168] There appears to have been another shift in which China has recognised the advantages of normative, reputational strength in world politics, but while this certainly makes the country "smarter and more sophisticated," it does not necessarily make it "kinder or gentler."[169] The likely explanation is a self-interested adaptation to the

[163] Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel – "China's New Diplomacy," in Liu, p.394
[164] Motivaction, p.8
[165] "Chinese public sees more powerful role in world, names U.S. as top threat," Richard Wike and Bruce Stokes, *Pew Research Centre*, 05/10/16
[166] Krasner, p.6
[167] Thomas Christensen – "Chinese Realpolitik" in Liu, p.59
[168] Samuel Kim – "China's Path to Great Power Status in the Globalisation Era," in Liu, p.356
[169] Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel – "China's New Diplomacy," in Liu, p.397

rewards on offer in the international community rather than a self-enforcing identity shift. Perhaps the most international relations scholars can hope for is that "norms and social structures…constrain the choices and behaviour of self-interested states, which operate according to a logic of consequences."[170] To hope for more will usually, though not always, end in disappointment.

[170] Checkel (1998), p.327

Chapter 4: Conclusions

4.1 Future Research and Summary

At this point it is necessary to show a degree of methodological humility: this paper does not contain primary evidence; instead it relies on the research of a range of experts on environmental issues, China and international relations, and attempts to fuse all this information together into a plausible answer to an interesting question. One important requirement for becoming more confident in this answer, as well as identifying more precisely the importance of each independent variable, would be collaboration with a Chinese-speaking academic capable of interviewing key decision-makers and political experts inside China. If this could be organised there would be several possible avenues for future research. For one, given the centrality of domestic legitimacy (claimed by this paper) in explaining continued Chinese commitment to the Paris Agreement, further development of the thesis could fruitfully include government approval surveys of Chinese citizens from areas with varying pollution levels. All other things being equal, results would be expected to show lower government approval in highly polluted areas. Looking further into the state of China's international reputation by speaking to foreign diplomats and senior representatives of leading international organisations like the UN would also be revealing, indicating whether Beijing's environmental policy is having a broader normative effect.

This essay has explored some of the different possibilities for why China is standing firm on its climate commitments in the face of American defection. There are clearly a range of different forces influencing its decision to do so but, based on all the theory and sources expanded upon in this paper, the most important appears to be the damage being done to domestic legitimacy by catastrophic pollution levels, and the need to recalibrate the balance between sustainability and economic growth. The tension between these two goals is lessened by the economic opportunities involved, both in

making industry more efficient and in selling green technology to the world. The interdependence between these two motivations, domestic legitimacy and economics, forms the core of Chinese commitment to the Paris Agreement. An important third factor is likely to be the boosting of China's international reputation, particularly in contrast to the United States, that will come from behaving like a cooperative international citizen, supporting both prevailing global environmental norms and multilateralism more generally. All three motivations are instrumental rather than normative in the long term, though of course the third is normative in the short term. Hence, China is tactically greening its pursuit of self-interest in response to domestic and international realities which place more of an emphasis on environmental issues than before. There are two final questions to address: first, how sticky is China's environmental commitment likely to be, and second, how could global environmental norms themselves be affected by Chinese engagement with them?

4.2 Norm Entrenchment

As discussed above, states are quite fluid in their pursuit of self-interest, and apparent stability in the world system can largely be explained by relatively constant military and economic capabilities rather than deeply-held normative commitments. Some would ask, well, does it matter why China appears to be standing firm on its climate commitments? Whether it is doing so for long term instrumental gain or because its identity has shifted to absorb an internally or socially derived code of acceptable behaviour, the result is the same. To give a corporate example, "whether or not Toyota's intent was to help save the planet is immaterial to the fact that the company's knowledge was mobilised to provide a solution to a looming social problem."[171] Certainly a socially beneficial outcome delivered by an actor's pursuit of self-interest is better than the outcome not being delivered. However, if China is only supporting and enacting environmentalism because it perceives such actions to serve its national

[171] Devinney, p.49

interests, the obvious corollary is that if climate mitigation becomes harmful to its interests as conceived at that time it will discard its green policies. For example, if domestic legitimacy is really as crucial to the formation of foreign policy as appears to be the case, once the air pollution largely disappears and most people are no longer visibly affected by it the pendulum could well swing back to a focus on unconstrained economic performance.[172]

There may be several countervailing forces operating against this discarding of environmental commitments. A favourite topic of constructivists is the discursive chains states can be wrapped in by their public promises, constraining the extent and speed with which they can abandon unproductive courses of action. There is a large literature exploring the ways that international actors, particularly transnational activist networks, apply pressure to states by raising awareness about disparities between discourse and action. Keck and Sikkink give the example of a hypothetical government that "claims to be protecting indigenous areas or ecological reserves…[being] potentially more vulnerable to charges that such areas are endangered than one that makes no such claim."[173] Admittedly, it is possible that China is less open to normative pressure of this kind than, say, the US might be because it has always championed state sovereignty over human rights and does not claim to be a global fount of freedom and democracy. It is also currently unclear how the fragmentation of news sources and the rise of 'post-truth' as a phenomenon will affect the ability of activists to deploy discursive tools like the civilising force of hypocrisy against states.

Another potential anchor preventing the easy rejection of climate commitments may be the ability of Type I socialisation to evolve into Type II. Neoliberal institutionalists differ with realists about the extent to which international institutions can facilitate cooperation in world politics,[174] but even

[172] "In China, Environmentalism Means Two Different Things," Megan McArdle, *The Atlantic*, 24/11/10
[173] Keck and Sikkink, p.26
[174] Koremenos et al., p.764

they tend to subscribe to a rational choice model of action which sees states with fixed interests responding to a set of external constraints. However, it may be that norms which were initially followed for instrumental reasons become more deeply internalised and begin to partially constitute the identity of the actor, changing its interests in the process. These norms would then become harder to shake off than a neoliberal institutionalist might assume, either because they attain a certain level of appropriateness or because of the bounded rationality of humans, and their tendency to satisfice rather than infinitely assess options. Finally, if China rises to a "custodial role in the global system," it may act like the US has "to preserve the ultimate goals of international society as it perceives them;"[175] if environmentalism serves China's instrumental goals at that time it may use its power to weave green awareness more centrally into the tapestry of international norms and vigorously defend it, pressuring other countries to accept it, socialising foreign elites,[176] and further reinforcing and expanding the benefits widespread low-carbon consciousness offers to its national interests.

4.3 Norm Change

Norms are not static. The international ideational structure within which we all live has a powerful effect on how agents act in the world, but it also evolves in response to those actions. The relationship between agents and structure is mutually constitutive, what Checkel calls "the feedback effects of state (agent) behaviour on the norms themselves."[177] The potential for both the normative structure to influence states but also for states to influence the structure is only being enhanced by economic and, more importantly, cultural globalisation. Appadurai cites the pressures ever more liquid "ideoscapes," such as democracy, may bring to bear on currently incompatible states like China,[178] but such interconnectedness also promises an extraordinarily conductive ideational network through which

[175] "Chinese power and the idea of a responsible state" – Rosemary Foot in Zhang and Austin, p.34
[176] Ikenberry and Kupchan, p.283
[177] Checkel (1998), p.332
[178] Appadurai, p.40

a rising state like China could diffuse its own environmental norms across the world in a normative blowback effect. The stronger the state the greater its chance of benefitting from globalisation,[179] and China has grown in strength faster than any of its rivals. With all this in mind, then, what feedback effects could an agent as powerful as China have on environmental norms given both the importance of material interests in norm formation[180] and the fact that China is already moving towards becoming a 'norm-maker' in the international sphere?[181] To answer this question, it is first important to understand the characteristics of prevalent environmental norm regimes now.

There are a range of possible responses to climate change which can, at least *prima facie*, be rationally argued for. This is one of the reasons global environmental norms are so vulnerable to being shaped by interests rather than ethics. The facts and how those facts are used are two different things: it is a scientific fact that 2016 saw the warmest global average surface temperatures since modern records began in 1880, the third year in a row to claim that unsettling honour.[182] Yet national executive branches are largely seeking information that will justify "the traditional foreign policy goals of advancing material wealth and power."[183] It is unsurprising then that, of the three most prominent proposed strategies for tackling anthropocentric climate change, it is civic environmentalism which frequently loses out to green governmentality and ecological modernisation.[184] These environmental paths essentially correspond to Habermas' three segments of society: civil society, state and market respectively. Setting out the current composition of the environmental normative structure at the world level with any degree of accuracy is incredibly challenging, but there are clues. As far back as the 1992 UNCED Summit in Rio de Janeiro, "the view that liberalisation in trade and finance is consistent with,

[179] Hurrell and Woods, p.468
[180] Clapp and Swanston, p.328
[181] Jinnah, p.299
[182] "NASA, NOAA data show 2016 warmest year on record globally," *NASA*, 18/01/17
[183] Haas, p.573
[184] "Climate Governance Beyond 2012," by Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, in Pettenger, p.124

and even necessary for, international environmental protection"[185] became entrenched. Okereke suggests that the institutionalisation of an environmental norm into the international community is likely to be "dependent on how much its requirements could be met within the limits set by a prior commitment to the neoliberal economic order."[186] Is rising Chinese power likely to change this state of affairs?

In short, no. Ironically for a communist country, the main Chinese conception of environmentalism being pursued is completely opposed ideologically to the Marxist (civic) environmentalists, and is much more in line with the eco-modernist perspective. China's modernisation is "an undertaking rooted in scientific rationality and expertise,"[187] and its vision according to the vice president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences is to be among the "world giants in science and technology" by 2021.[188] At the local level, "market-based instruments such as eco-compensation schemes, green credits and green insurance have been increasingly utilised."[189] These signals combine to suggest a very commercial, technical understanding of how to deal with climate change, and it seems likely that in the pursuit of its own self-interest China merely augments the hegemony of the industrial capitalist vision of environmentalism.

Given the strength of the Chinese state domestically compared to the economically liberalised Western countries which have heavily influenced environmental norms up until now, we might at least expect a rebalancing in favour of state, rather than market, based solutions to climate change; yet China seems to be using state power to *help* its markets and benefit from the commercial opportunities of green technology, rather than limit market power. Given economic power is such an essential

[185] Bernstein, p.4
[186] Okereke, p.26
[187] Heikkila, p.53
[188] "China aims to be a giant in science and technology around 2049," People's Daily, 26/11/04
[189] Guo et al., p.561

component of state strength, and given the dominance of global capitalism in defining economic relations, it seems likely that state-based and market-based responses to a deteriorating environment will go hand in hand anyway. This path is unlikely to prevent catastrophic natural destruction, and unfortunately just because very scientific, technological advancement is at the core of China's commercial green strategy does not mean the state will be responsive to scientific evidence demonstrating the inadequacy of its chosen path.[190] A continued ever worsening climate may eventually highlight the need for a different response, but given China sees the ideological sphere as "a complicated, intense struggle,"[191] it is unlikely to allow genuinely sustainable conceptions of environmentalism which do not offer the same national advantages to permeate the international normative structure without a fight.

[190] Haas, p.570

[191] Leaked party communique, 22 April 2013 from BBC Panorama – Season 63, Episode 40: The Xi Factor (22:57-23:11)

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