

Title: China cannot sacrifice economic development for environmental governance

Introduction

Environmental protection is undeniably important, yet it poses a challenging question: should governments compromise economic development to prioritize it? In China, poverty continues to be a significant concern. The Chinese government's primary objective is to eradicate poverty and improve living standards for its people. Consequently, economic growth must take precedence over environmental advancements. While addressing environmental issues is essential, it should not detract from more urgent economic matters.

Summary

"Under the Dome," an investigative documentary by Chai Jing released in February 2015, explores China's air pollution crisis. Through a combination of interviews and data, Chai Jing highlights the severity of Beijing's air pollution, attributing it to increased energy consumption, industrial emissions, and transportation activities. The film also examines the Chinese government's limitations in addressing these issues, citing that the Environmental Protection Bureau lacks the authority to shut down heavily polluting enterprises and the regulatory department's inability to provide effective oversight. Despite these challenges, Chai Jing urges people to take action in promoting environmental governance. The documentary has made significant contributions to China's environmental protection efforts and raised global awareness of environmental challenges.

Personal Reaction

Watching "Under the Dome" for the first time was a profoundly shocking experience, as it revealed the gravity of environmental issues, I had previously been oblivious to. As a Chinese student in my twenties, I have personally experienced the smog mentioned in the documentary. The city I lived in was not a heavily industrialized area, yet the smog was pervasive, casting a gray veil over the sky and obscuring the sun daily. Initially, I mistook this pollution for fog, not realizing its true nature. Although I did not watch the documentary when it was initially released in China, I understand it had a tremendous impact on public opinion, possibly leading to an increased emphasis on environmental issues within the country.

Reflecting on the film nine years later, I remain deeply moved and find it difficult to comprehend that I once lived in such a heavily polluted environment. Consequently, I have developed a strong interest in environmental issues. However, my perspective shifted after watching another video on YouTube—an interview between Chai Jing and Professor Ding Zhongli. In this interview, Chai Jing suggested that China should adhere to the carbon emission reduction rules set by

Europe. In response, Professor Ding Zhongli posed a thought-provoking question: "Are Chinese people not human?"

This question prompted me to reflect on the issue from a different angle. European countries initiated the Industrial Revolution and started emitting carbon early on. Now that they have established their industries, they impose restrictions on the development of other nations. China, as a developing country with millions of people living in poverty, should be cautious not to prioritize environmental issues at the expense of economic development. While it is essential to address environmental concerns, China must strike a balance between protecting the environment and promoting economic growth, ensuring a better future for its people.

Correlation

Chai Jing's documentary has left an indelible impression on me, but I still maintain that economic development in China is more important than environmental governance. In my opinion, China's foremost goal at present should be economic development. Although China's total GDP is currently the second largest globally, it is far from sufficient. "In 2022, the industrial sector generated almost 33.2 percent of China's GDP. It was by far the largest contributor, followed by the wholesale and retail industry, responsible for 9.5 percent, and the financial sector, which produced 8.0 percent of the country's economic output. Since China is the second-largest economy globally, the industrial sector's output alone exceeded the entire economy of Germany." (Statista 2022) It is evident that industry still accounts for the most significant share of China's GDP, and China cannot change this fact quickly.

However, the development of industry inevitably brings pollution—an unavoidable reality for any country and any enterprise. For instance, in the 20th century, Britain caused severe air pollution to develop its industry. The London smog incident in 1952 was the worst pollution event in British history. Following this incident, the British government implemented a series of measures to compensate for the damage and achieved favorable results. The air quality in the UK improved; however, the British economy declined during the same period. "China's economic growth is in long-term decline after hitting a peak of 14.2% in 2007. The International Monetary Fund and private sector forecasters expect economic growth no higher than about 4% through the rest of the decade." (The Associated Press 2023) Over the past ten years, China's economic growth has begun to slow down, which I believe is related to its national policy.

From 2002 to 2012, China's top leader, Hu Jintao, held that economic development was the most crucial goal and promulgated the "all focusing on economic construction" policy. Enterprises made concessions, and employment rates increased, the economy rapidly developed, but serious environmental pollution problems emerged during this period. Consequently, when China's current top leader, Xi Jinping, took office, he proposed that "golden mountains and silver mountains are not as good as green water and green mountains." Numerous polluting

enterprises were banned, unemployment rates rose, and economic growth slowed down. It is undeniable that the environment in China has been improving in recent years. As a Chinese resident, I can feel that the quality of life is getting better. However, for those struggling to make ends meet, the environment is not the top priority. "Last year, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said China still had 600 million people whose monthly income was barely 1,000 yuan (\$154). He said that was not enough to rent a room in a city." (Jack Goodman 2021) That is the current situation in China, and it's worth noting that the entire population of Europe is only around 700 million people.

Many people argue that China should carry out industrial upgrading and vigorously develop the financial industry, which can allocate resources more efficiently and promote economic growth. However, industry can create more jobs. China has the largest population in the world, and without sufficient jobs, social instability will inevitably ensue. I understand that environmental protection is being advocated internationally, but the Chinese government should approach this issue rationally. European countries have completed the industrialization process; for example, the United Kingdom completed the Industrial Revolution in the last century. Thus, it can now ask other countries not to continue down the same path, but China is still a developing country. China needs polluting industries, such as manufacturing, to increase employment and drive economic development. The rise of China is not just the rise of a minority group; it is the rise of all Chinese people. Therefore, I believe the Chinese government cannot afford to ignore economic development for the sake of environmental governance.

China should strike a balance between economic development and environmental protection to ensure sustainable progress. Developing the economy and providing jobs is crucial, but neglecting the environment could lead to long-term health and social issues that may hinder China's growth in the future. The Chinese government could explore alternative strategies, such as investing in green technologies and renewable energy sources, to create new jobs while reducing pollution.

Moreover, China could implement stricter regulations on polluting industries while offering incentives to companies that adopt environmentally friendly practices. This approach would not only help preserve the environment but also encourage innovation and efficiency among businesses, leading to a more sustainable economic model. Additionally, the government could invest in public awareness campaigns and educational programs to promote a greener lifestyle and foster a sense of responsibility among citizens.

In conclusion, while economic development is a top priority for China, it should not come at the expense of the environment. The Chinese government must adopt a balanced approach to ensure the well-being of its people and secure the nation's future growth. By investing in sustainable industries, enforcing strict regulations, and promoting environmental awareness, China can continue to prosper economically while addressing its environmental challenges.

Conclusion

Environmental protection is undeniably crucial, as no one desires to live in the conditions depicted in the documentary. However, it is essential to strike a balance between economic development and environmental governance. The Chinese government should prioritize economic growth while implementing measures to minimize environmental damage. To achieve this delicate balance, the government can empower the environmental protection department to ban high-polluting, low-profit enterprises and improve the supervision system.

By raising industry standards, the government can force businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices and upgrade their operations. This approach encourages the growth of eco-conscious enterprises that contribute to economic development while adhering to environmental regulations. Additionally, the government can strengthen public opinion guidance, encouraging the public to hold businesses accountable for their environmental impact. This strategy ensures nationwide supervision and helps to identify and shut down illegal enterprises that harm the environment.

Ultimately, the Chinese government should firmly support enterprises that meet environmental standards and contribute to the nation's economic growth. By focusing on both economic development and environmental governance, China can work towards a sustainable and prosperous future for its people and the planet.

Reference

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