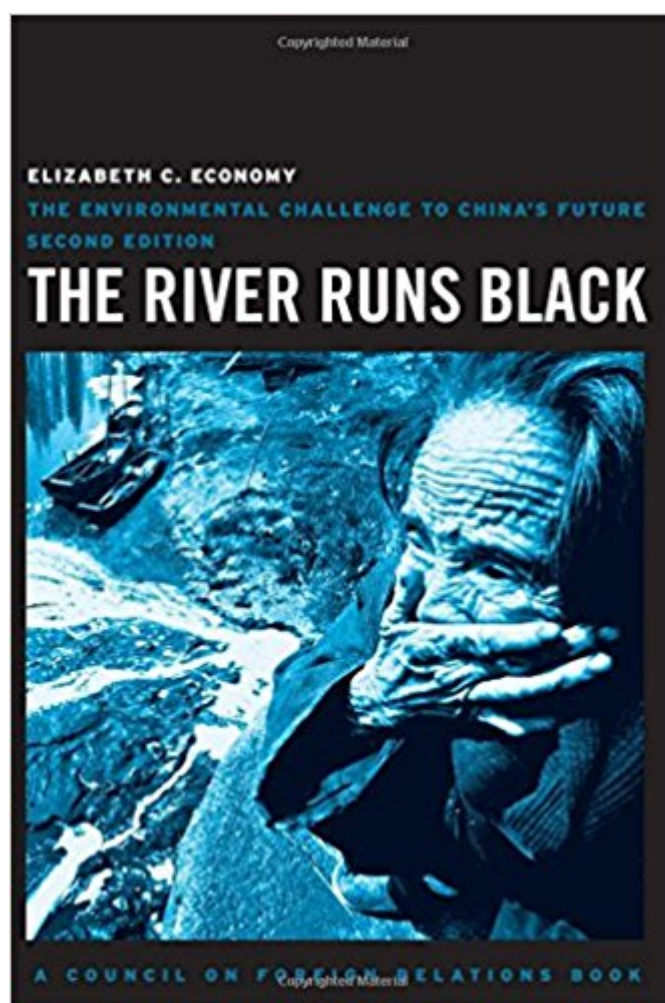


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# The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge To China's Future (Council On Foreign Relations Books (Cornell University))



## Synopsis

China's spectacular economic growth over the past two decades has dramatically depleted the country's natural resources and produced skyrocketing rates of pollution. Environmental degradation in China has also contributed to significant public health problems, mass migration, economic loss, and social unrest. In *The River Runs Black*, Elizabeth C. Economy examines China's growing environmental crisis and its implications for the country's future development. Drawing on historical research, case studies, and interviews with officials, scholars, and activists in China, Economy traces the economic and political roots of China's environmental challenge and the evolution of the leadership's response. She argues that China's current approach to environmental protection mirrors the one embraced for economic development: devolving authority to local officials, opening the door to private actors, and inviting participation from the international community, while retaining only weak central control. The result has been a patchwork of environmental protection in which a few wealthy regions with strong leaders and international ties improve their local environments, while most of the country continues to deteriorate, sometimes suffering irrevocable damage. Economy compares China's response with the experience of other societies and sketches out several possible futures for the country. This second edition of *The River Runs Black* is updated with information about events between 2005 and 2009, covering China's tumultuous transformation of its economy and its landscape as it deals with the political implications of this behavior as viewed by an international community ever more concerned about climate change and dwindling energy resources.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The statistics and the anecdotes recounted in *The River Runs Black* are worse than ominous: China has six of the ten most polluted cities in the world; just by breathing, some children are smoking the equivalent of two packets of cigarettes a day; acid rain affects a third of the territory; more than three-quarters of the river water flowing through urban areas is unsuitable for drinking or fishing; each year, 300,000 people die prematurely as a result of air pollution; in one part of Guangdong Province, where circuit boards had been processed and burned, level of lead in the water were 2,400 times the guideline level set by the World Health Organisation." •Financial Times, 26 June 2004 (reviewing the first edition) "As described by Elizabeth Economy, the scale of China's environmental degradation is shocking. Her book is particularly strong in its examination of the peculiarly Chinese reasonsâ• beyond the country's rapid development and huge population pressureâ• that lie behind this: the leadership's obsession with short-term growth to preserve social stability, whatever the ultimate cost, is one; the weak rule of law and a tradition of devolving power to the regions, where watchdogs and polluters are often in collusion, is another." •The Economist, 10 July 2004 (reviewing the first edition) "In Taiyun, a coal-producing region, water scarcity meant the city had the stark choice of moving 3 million people, shutting down heavy industry, or diverting a major river. It chose the last option. Water shortages also mean crop losses. In Qianghai, some 2,000 lakes and rivers have dried up, with serious implications for the flow of the crucial Yellow River. Already a quarter of China, about the size of the United States, is desert. Air pollution is also serious, creating health problems that mean days lost on the job. Beijing roads carry 2 million cars now, with 3 million predicted for next year. Traffic cops, breathing foul air, live 40 years on average. That's some of the environmental damage toted up by Elizabeth Economy, author of *The River Runs Black*." •Christian Science Monitor, 29 April 2004 (reviewing the first edition) "Economy examines the historical, political, cultural, and bureaucratic issues that will affect China's ability to meet the needs of its people and its environment. . . . She concludes that China's environment has paid 'a terrible price' as the country has turned from a nation in poverty to an economic power. It is possible, but by no means certain, she says, that it will be able to repair the damage or even to slow the degradation." •Chronicle Review, 18 June 2004 (reviewing the first edition) "According to *The River Runs Black*, an outstanding new book by Elizabeth Economy, . . . five of China's biggest rivers are 'not suitable for human contact.' . . . According to Economy, Li Xioping, executive producers of

'Focus,' a Chinese investigative news program, says peasants now come to the 'Focus' studios to beg them to investigate environmental problems caused by local officials."â •Joshua Kurlantzick, The New Republic, 30 August 2004 (reviewing the first edition) "Elizabeth C. Economy's book hits my 'Top Ten' list from the day it is published. It is a clear and compelling reminder that no engagement with Chinaâ •commercial, diplomatic, cultural, intellectualâ •can afford to ignore China's vast environmental dilemmas and the deep social, economic, and political structural problems that make environmental salvation an uncertain enterprise at best. The case for international engagement with China emerges even more strongly from this book; the case for 'irrational exuberance' is dashed to smithereens."â •Robert A. Kapp, President, US-China Business Council (reviewing the first edition) "Rivers run black, deserts advance from the north, and smoky haze covers the country. Elizabeth C. Economy both provides a gripping account of a severely degraded environment and thoughtfully analyzes what could be China's most important challenge in the twenty-first century."â •Gordon G. Chang, author of The Coming Collapse of China (reviewing the first edition) "Elizabeth C. Economy captures extraordinarily well the complex historical, systemic, political, economic, and international forces that are shaping China's environmental outcomes. No other volume on this enormously important issue is as comprehensive, balanced, and incisive. True to her deep understanding of the crosscurrents of China's present environmental efforts, Economy is agnostic about which of three startlingly different futures will come to pass. Her book enables us to understand both the potential for each of these futures and the means to lessen the chances of environmental meltdown on the Chinese mainland."â •Kenneth Lieberthal, Professor of Political Science and Professor of International Business at the University of Michigan (reviewing the first edition) "Elizabeth C. Economy has written a well-researched analysis of the environmental degradation that has occurred in China and its implications for the rest of the world. This book will provide critical guidance for the United States and other nations to pursue enlightened policies that will help the Chinese address our mutual environmental problems."â •Theodore Roosevelt IV, environmentalist and Chair of Strategies for the Global Environment (reviewing the first edition)

"Elizabeth C. Economy's book hits my 'Top Ten' list from the day it is published. It is a clear and compelling reminder that no engagement with China--commercial, diplomatic, cultural, intellectual--can afford to ignore China's vast environmental dilemmas and the deep social, economic, and political structural problems that make environmental salvation an uncertain enterprise at best. The case for international engagement with China emerges even more strongly from this book; the case for 'irrational exuberance' is dashed to smithereens."--Robert

A. Kapp, President, US-China Business Council "Rivers run black, deserts advance from the north, and smoky haze covers the country. Elizabeth C. Economy both provides a gripping account of a severely degraded environment and thoughtfully analyzes what could be China's most important challenge in the twenty-first century."&#x97;Gordon G. Chang, author of *The Coming Collapse of China* "Elizabeth C. Economy captures extraordinarily well the complex historical, systemic, political, economic, and international forces that are shaping China's environmental outcomes. No other volume on this enormously important issue is as comprehensive, balanced, and incisive. True to her deep understanding of the crosscurrents of China's present environmental efforts, Economy is agnostic about which of three startlingly different futures will come to pass. Her book enables us to understand both the potential for each of these futures and the means to lessen the chances of environmental meltdown on the Chinese mainland."&#x97;Kenneth Lieberthal, Professor of Political Science and Professor of International Business at the University of Michigan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is a well researched, excellent book. Elizabeth Economy has followed environmental politics in China for a long time -- and is able to do so in Chinese -- so she knows her subject intimately (and many of the key actors in the country personally). For this reason, the book provides huge amounts of detailed information, which is valuable but also makes it a somewhat tedious read in places. The other drawback in the book is that, since it was published in 2004, many things have happened in the rapidly changing Chinese context. Still, the key messages contained in the book are as valid today as they were six years ago. Obviously, the facts about the historical background to exploitation of natural resources in China, the massive and destructive campaigns during Mao's rule, and the vast environmental costs of the explosive economic growth since then have not changed. The book is quite policy-relevant and forward looking. Some of the interesting parts deal with lessons for China from the Soviet Union and its former satellites, as well as from other countries in southeast and east Asia (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand...) regarding how these have dealt with political and economic change, and how environmental politics have played out in those contexts. Throughout the book, Elizabeth Economy pays particular attention to the role of NGOs and political participation. She ends the book with three possible scenarios for China's future: (1) China goes green; (2) inertia sets in; and (3) environmental meltdown. The events of the past six years tend to support most the second scenario: extended status quo, in which priority is placed on economic growth and maintaining social stability, while environmental degradation continues. There are, however, cases that could support either the first or the second scenario as

well. There are positive signs, especially at the central level where the government and CCP seem to have realized the importance of environment for continued prosperity. Similarly, great strides have been made in some cities, notably in Beijing in connection with the Beijing Olympics. On the other hand, in the interior especially environmental issues -- water quality and quantity, erosion and land degradation, deforestation and pollution -- are rampant resulting in increasing social, economic and political pressures. Time will tell which way China will turn. And this will have major implications for the world as a whole.

"The River Runs Black" by Elizabeth C. Economy is an intelligent analysis of contemporary China and its burgeoning environmental crisis. This engaging book helps us understand how globalization is reshaping China and issues an urgent plea for international cooperation to help monitor and rectify an increasingly worrisome situation. Ms. Economy tells us how China's environment has been steadily deteriorating over the past centuries due to wars, political power struggles and overpopulation. However, today's problems are attributable to specific policy decisions by China's government that has favored rapid economic development through engagement with the international business community. Unfortunately, the particular kinds of economic development favored by China's rulers has led to myriad environmental problems including deforestation, desertification, and air and water pollution. The collusion of local government and business interests has made it difficult to obtain reliable data or to implement solutions where it is feared that plant shutdowns might result in mass unemployment and social unrest, making difficult problems seem untractable. Environmental consciousness in China has increased as the problems have become more visible and as the country has engaged with the world economy. Ms. Economy profiles some of the courageous and inspirational individuals who have struggled for conservation, urban renewal and grass-roots democracy such as Tang Xiyang, He Bochuan, Dai Qing and others. While environmentalists have achieved some successes (such as protecting endangered species of monkeys and antelopes), the author believes that the government's championing of highly destructive projects such as the Three Gorges Dam proves that much more needs to be done. Ms. Economy recounts the experiences of the former Communist nations of Eastern Europe to gain insight into how China might resolve its environmental problems. The Chernobyl disaster catalyzed local environmental groups into pushing for political reforms that brought down the Communists in the USSR and elsewhere. Recognizing that China's Communist Party is a "patronage machine committed to rapid economic development" and devoid of any ideological purpose other than self-perpetuation, Ms. Economy believes that increasing democratization in China could easily

undermine the country's single Party system. Of course, China's leaders are keenly aware of this threat and consequently have tightly circumscribed the activities of environmental organizations, but the author is hopeful that the contradictions between increasing environmental degradation and the lack of a meaningful democracy will eventually force China's political system to change. In the last section, Ms. Economy speculates about the manner in which China may develop in the future. The author envisions three possible scenarios: China goes green; inertia sets in; and environmental meltdown. Ms. Economy thinks that the U.S. should take the lead in encouraging China to develop its regulatory system and implement green technologies so that the country can embark on an environmentally sustainable path. Indeed, the unpredictable consequences of a Chinese environmental meltdown should give the international community pause to consider how it might help China -- and by extension all of us -- to avoid a worse case scenario. I highly recommend this superbly written book to everyone.

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