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The Great Smog of China: An Interview with Anna L. Ahlers, Mette Halskov Hansen, and Rune Svarverud

The Great Smog of China: A Short Event History of Air Pollution (Asia Shorts)

By Anna L. Ahlers, Mette Halskov Hansen, and Rune Svarverud

Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2020

148 pages, ISBN: 978-0924304927, Paperback

The Great Smog of China: A Short Event History of Air Pollution *traces Chinese air pollution events dating back to more than 2,000 years ago. Based on the authors' fieldwork, interviews and text studies, the book offers a short and concise history of selected air pollution incidents that for varying reasons prompted different kinds of responses and forms of engagement in Chinese society. The three authors, from the disciplines of anthropology, China studies and political science, identify traceable incidents of smog and air pollution that have been communicated in different media and came to impact society in various ways. This also informs a discussion of what it takes to transform people's experiences of health and environmentally related risks of pollution into broader forms of socio-political agency.*
In the following interview, authors Anna L. Ahlers, Mette Halskov Hansen, and Rune Svarverud discuss their book with EAA Editor Lucien Ellington, and in particular the third chapter which discusses the Mao years of China.

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Briefly, how did the three of you become interested in the topic that became the title of your book?

Air pollution in China has somehow been a topic ever since we started traveling to the country, some us from the mid-1900s. Going through days of "Beijing cough" after landing and adjusting to breathing again in the heavily polluted cities where we studied, living under a cloak of haze, or seeing smoke exhaust, apparently unabatedly, from cars, households and factories, was just part of the whole experience. However, it was during our fieldwork over the last decade or so that we really noticed how perceptions and communication about air quality changed. Upon the initiative of the US Embassy in Beijing, real time air quality data was made available around the 2008 Beijing Olympics, triggered by a fear for athletes' health. Chinese citizens began to pay much more attention to the potential effects of air pollutants on their own and their children's health. Soon, the political authorities had to follow suit and monitor and publish air pollution data in an effort to show that they were getting ahead of this problem. A new Chinese word for smog (*wumai*) was coined and smartphone applications warning about the concentration of fine particulate air pollution ($PM_{2.5}$) and other pollutants became as popular as the weather forecast.
We found this fascinating and wanted to understand these developments in all their complexity. At the same time, we wanted to double check whether what happened in the country was really something new – was it a new air pollution consciousness, or did it have a longer history? It was our hypothesis that while air pollution is a global problem – our own home countries, Denmark, Germany, and Norway struggled heavily with it in the 19th and 20th centuries and are still burdened by it today – the problem takes its own path in different contexts and countries. It requires certain experiences, sometimes watershed events, to transform what may seem to be a local issue into a society-wide communicated problem.

The title of the book was inspired by the historical smog incident in the 1950s in London, which has ever since been called "The Great Smog of London", and, of course, it is an allusion to "the Great Wall of China". Maybe it serves as a reminder that when we deal with problems in China, they always happen at a massive scale, given the country's vast territory, population, resources and diversity.

The remaining questions focus upon the Mao years, but are there other chapters that might be of special interest to world history or human geography instructors or students (two subjects that are taught in North America at the three levels of educational institutions we serve)? Does a particular chapter come to mind that you might recommend for these teachers and/or students?

We often think of air pollution only as an outcome of population growth, industrialization, and demand for goods in modern society. In the book, we show that while heavy smoke and air pollution are indeed symbols of the post-1949 Mao era development and industrialization, polluted air in various forms has been a nuisance to people in China also long before the modern age, as especially chapters 1 and 2 describe. One of the major health hazards, for instance, is caused by local air pollution from the use of wood or coal for cooking and heating in private homes. In chapters 1 and 2, we identify events and cases of foul air that have been recorded throughout China's long literary history, and we show how people in China have been concerned with the adverse health effects of unclean air also long before coal triggered large scale industrial production that accelerated the pollution of air, soil, and water.

I thought the title of chapter 3, "1949–1978: The Ideologization of Smoke" was particularly appropriate and the three of you must feel the same way or you wouldn't have used it. Please share one or two powerful examples from the chapter that illustrate this theme.

First of all, there is a quote that is often ascribed to Mao, according to which he enthusiastically envisioned to see the center of the country's capital Beijing being covered by a forest of smokestacks. While it is hard to find an ultimate proof for this alleged citation, there can be no doubt that in the first decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), smoke was propagated as a symbol of thriving production, development, and overall modernization and progress. Pollution output and environmental degradation were not regarded as a problem that needed to be reined in or solved, but as a byproduct of industrialization or a necessary evil. At the same time, Chinese state media reported about industrial air pollution in other countries, especially the US, but framed it as a much more serious problem there that was solely caused by vicious and wasteful capitalism and a failure of political leadership. In socialist China, to the contrary, the CCP insisted that factories actually do not produce pollution, because everything that was emitted from smokestacks, such as soot or dust, would be sophisticatedly collected and recycled.

Later, in the early 1970s, air pollution was gradually recognized as something that actually had to be avoided and tackled, and the Chinese government even sent delegates to international conventions where pollution as a serious challenge for humanity was discussed. Mitigation of emissions produced by the most polluting heavy industries in China became a topic for debate. But even in this period of emerging international exchange about the problem, and with more efforts undertaken to tackle it domestically, ideologized propaganda played a significant role. In state media reports, achievements in industrial air pollution abatement were always coupled with eulogies on the Party's leadership. For example, the *People's Daily* would portray "chimney dust removal work as the implementation of the height of Chairman Mao's route of proletarian revolution" in an article published in 1974 (see p. 75 in the book).

Since the Great Leap Forward was a case study in chapter 3 and many of our readers either teach or learn about this seminal event in the Mao years, please briefly elaborate on major "take-aways" from your chapter that you believe facilitate better general understanding of the Great Leap Forward.

In chapter 3, we tried to estimate the environmental impacts of the Great Leap Forward, in particular with regard to air pollution. We approach the Great Leap as an event of massive air pollution in China's history, although it is very hard to find exact and reliable information about the scope and concentration of air pollutants during this period. It was a very turbulent time, as Chinese society was mobilized in a huge all-encompassing industrialization campaign, and there was no room for or interest in a systematic and scientific measuring of the resulting pollution. That means, we had to extrapolate quite a bit on the basis of what scattered and diverse sources reveal about the forced encroachment of heavy industries into all parts of China. But there is no doubt that the Great Leap campaign had a huge impact on air quality. Just think of what kind of low-efficient fuels, mainly found around the villages, were burned in the notorious "backyard furnaces", or the low-quality ingredients that were melted during steel ingot production. Local forests were cut by villagers due to the sheer need for fuel for their makeshift mini-factories, something which also resulted in the diminishing of CO_2 abating capacities.

As we know, the Great Leap Forward did not only have immediate consequences, as it failed to sustainably boost high-quality steel production in China. It had devastating long-term effects, for example, the horrific famine between 1958 and 1962 due to a neglect of agriculture, as well as large scale deforestation throughout China. This had huge consequences for wildlife, soil erosion control, and carbon dioxide mitigation. Finally, the countrywide push for hasty increases in steel production and industrialization required immediate and cheap access to energy. It set in motion the age of massive coal consumption in China, often very unclean coal, which would once more accelerate during the economic expansion of the Reform and Opening era that began in 1978.

What this case study reveals about the event of the Great Leap in general, probably is the degree to which the one-sided focus on a single type of developmental goal was enforced upon society. The pure desperation to reach coerced targets of industrialization and particularly steel production, drove people to destroy their local biological environments. The requirement to blindly follow Mao's gargantuan vision, which was implemented in a top-down and totalitarian fashion, crushed voices arguing for alternative trajectories and the value of scientific insight. It overruled any potential concerns about the long-term effects and the lack of sustainability of this attempted leap.

Thank you for the book and the interview!

About the authors:

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METTE HALSKOV HANSEN is professor in China studies, University of Oslo. She has done research on minority education, ethnic identities, internal colonization, individualization and, most recently, (air) pollution and human agency in China. She is currently PI for a new collaborative project that explores spiritually inspired environmental movements in China, Taiwan and India, and their potential for generating local and global change. Main publications include: *Lessons in Being Chinese* (1999), *Frontier People: Han Settlers in Ethnic Minority Areas of China* (2005), *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern China* (2010 with Svarverud), and *Educating the Chinese Individual* (2015).

RUNE SVARVERUD is professor of China studies at the University of Oslo. Initially, Svarverud engaged with ancient Chinese philosophy and philological studies. Later, he shifted attentions towards the cultural, scientific, and intellectual transfer of ideas between China and the West. In recent years he has engaged with the history of environmental degradation and air pollution in China. Main publications include: *Methods of the Way: Early Chinese Ethical Thought* (1998), *International Law as World Order in Late Imperial China: Translation, Reception and Discourse, 1847-1911* (2007), *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern China* (2010 with Hansen).