Introduction

Among the world’s influential powers, China is the latest to have joined the United Nations, entering only in late 1971. Its early record of participation in international treaties and conventions, especially during the 1970s, was slim. However, since the 1980s, China has become an increasingly active participant in global issues discussions and in international conventions. The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze China’s record in joining international conventions in the area of environmental protection, and the reasons explaining China’s participation.¹

The area of environmental protection is a “softer” field of international relations than arms control, peacekeeping, and even energy security. Nevertheless, China faces crises of immense magnitude in managing its environmental security.² For instance, in the area of climate warming, China is the second largest contributor of greenhouse gases to the global environment; it is expected to be the largest producer of these gases by 2020. Already in China, extreme weather events—severe droughts in the west and north, flooding, spread of desertification and increased dust storms, among other crises—have been linked to climate warming.

In a second area of global environmental significance—the conservation of biological diversity—China is a critically important agent, as it possesses between 10 and 12 percent of the known species in the world and many which are endemic to China. Compared to the global rate in species loss of 10 percent, the estimate for China is larger, about 15-20 percent.³ The recent China Species Red List indicates that 40 percent of mammals, 7 percent of birds, 28 percent of reptiles, 40 percent of amphibians, and 3 percent of fish are at risk, and a greater percentage of endemic than non-endemic species are in the threatened column.⁴

Both these sets of issues impinge on other nations, and like other environmental issues—for example, transboundary air pollution, over-fishing, and water quality and sufficiency—involves China in complex interactions with its neighbors. The international arena offers organizations and processes of benefit to the resolution of these issues. Moreover, because China remains an economically developing country and single-minded in its pursuit of economic growth and affluence in the near-term, the economic incentives available through international cooperation are an important stimulus to action.

In this preliminary paper, we consider three topics. First, we examine China’s record in joining international environmental conventions. Second, we attempt to explain China’s motivations in international environmental diplomacy. The immediate focus is on ways in which international participation might fortify China’s national interest, through attracting
economic resources to China, building capacity, forestalling domestic opposition, enhancing economic sustainability, and improving China’s global reputation. The final substantive section examines some of the costs to the environmental strategy China has adopted. In the concluding section we ask whether China has been a status quo or revisionist power in its environmental diplomacy.

**Participation in International Environmental Conferences and Conventions**

For most of its first 30 years, the People’s Republic of China paid little attention to environmental problems. Most studies of the Maoist era (1949-1976) point to accelerated environmental degradation, the consequences of devastating campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the most incisive criticism of China’s policy during this era is called *Mao’s War Against Nature.*

China’s joining the United Nations in late 1971 did not immediately lead to participation in environmental conventions, but China did participate in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in 1972. China’s role at the conference was minor, and it followed that of developing countries in charging the advanced industrialized countries with the responsibility for pollution control, while defending its right to exploit resources without external influence. Ross observes that “China was a ‘laggard’ participant in this international regime . . . by shunning treaty commitments or exhibiting a disdainful attitude toward compliance obligations.”

However, following the conference, Premier Li Peng “made a commitment to conscientiously implement resolutions adopted at the conference.”

After the 1972 UN conference held in Stockholm, China held the First National Environmental Protection Conference in Beijing, in August 1973. The primary achievement of this conference was the recognition that environmental problems existed in China and that environmental considerations should be incorporated into planning for economic development. This conference led the State Council to form “regulations on protecting and improving the environment,” which included the best-known policy, *San Tong Shi* (Three Simultaneous Points): “For any new projects, improvements or expansions, environmental protection devices should be designed, installed and operated simultaneously with the main body of the project.”

By the 1980s, China had become a willing participant in international conventions, and we mention a few related to conservation of endangered and threatened species and their critical habitats. In 1981, China joined the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which pledged it to ban the import and export of endangered species listed in the CITES annexes. This trade became especially problematical as economic development and rising affluence increased the demand for wild plants and animals. International criticism of China’s trade in internationally threatened species, such as the use of tiger and rhino parts in traditional Chinese medicine, caused the state to ban sales in 1993, but the problem of illegal trade remains.

China joined the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling in 1980, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1985, and acceded to the International Tropical Timber Agreement in 1986. China agreed to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer under liberal terms. It had until 2010 to phase out the production and consumption of ozone depleting substances (ODS), and it received US $740 million from the Multilateral Fund to develop ODS substitutes. In 1992, China joined the Ramsar Convention, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance
Especially as Waterfowl Habitat. China also participated in the Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which are also relevant for conservation and the sustainable use of biological diversity.

Up through the mid-1990s, China consistently opposed environmental diplomatic initiatives that threatened to constrain its development potential and interfered with its domestic affairs. The government expressed this position in advance of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro. China chaired a session of 41 developing countries, acknowledging the need for international cooperation to promote environmental protection and sustainable development but demanding financial assistance, the right to development, and to oppose interference in internal affairs of developing countries.\(^{13}\) The expression of this attitude in policy became the principle of “coordinated development,” under which environmental protection was given the same importance as development of the national economy, which implied a short-term view of environmental degradation.

However, China’s participation in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit led to the State Council’s adoption of Agenda 21 for China, which embodied the concept of sustainable development, emphasizing the rights of future generations. This was integrated into China’s ninth Five-Year Plan of National and Social Development and the Outline of Long-Term Targets for the Year 2010.\(^{14}\)

Two international conventions figured prominently in global deliberations at the time of the Rio conference—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD). China moved cautiously on the UNFCCC (signing it and later the Kyoto Protocol in 1997), but appeared to energetically subscribe to the CBD. It was one of the first developing nations to ratify this convention. This difference in approach might be explained by the perceived impact on economic development. The CBD did not impose broad constraints on development in the economy as a whole.\(^{15}\)

The CBD acknowledges sovereign equality of nations and their rights to biological resources within their territories, while urging nations to conserve biodiversity.\(^{16}\) An important component of the convention is the recognition of aboriginal and community use of biological resources, and the emphasis on traditional, as well as modern, forms of ecosystem knowledge (Articles 8[j], 10[c], 17[2] and 18[e]). Article 6 of the CBD calls for planning and the development of measures in each country to reduce threats to biodiversity. Under this requirement of the CBD, China files a “biodiversity action plan.”\(^{17}\) Recently, China has signed the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (SCPOPs), but implementation will be difficult, given that four out of nine chemical products on the SCPOPs list are still produced in China.\(^{18}\) The most recent convention ratified by China (in 2005) was the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. This subsidiary convention to the CBD affects China as it is one of the largest importers of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).\(^{19}\)

Since joining the United Nations, China has ratified more than 50 multilateral environmental agreements, including almost all of those considered to be major.\(^{20}\) Again, the largest number were signed from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. Observers note that China generally has become more willing to participate in such agreements and to do so at an earlier date.\(^{21}\) China’s adherence to international obligations has increased as international environmental diplomacy has accelerated and as China’s capacity to participate has increased.
China’s National Interests and Environmental Diplomacy

Like other nations, China examines the costs and benefits to its global participation and acts in its national interest. We suggest that accelerated participation in international environmental conventions and conferences has had the effect of serving China’s national interests in five areas: attracting foreign economic assistance, building institutional and human capacity, insuring domestic political stability, curbing unsustainable economic growth, and enhancing China’s international reputation. We consider each below.

1. Attracting foreign economic assistance. Until the 1990s, China lacked the budgetary means to address serious problems of species and habitat loss, deforestation, desertification, trans-boundary air pollution, and water sufficiency, among other environmental problems. Access to global, foreign national, multinational corporation, and international non-governmental organizational (INGO) resources thus was of invaluable use in its environmental protection efforts.

Of the loans from the World Bank to China in the period 1992-97, approximately 5-10 percent have been directed toward environmental protection. (This resulted from environmental criteria being added to China’s loans by leaders of G7 countries at a Houston summit meeting in mid-1990.) China has received loans or funds for environmental protection from other development agencies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/Global Environmental Facility (GEF), and Asian Development Bank, most of which have been administered by the World Bank. Multilateral development institutions, including the GEF, have given China US $3 billion in external assistance and export credits, with provisions extending to climate change and biodiversity.

Furthermore, China has received assistance to accomplish specific global environmental objectives. Its commitment to phasing out the use of CFCs in accordance with the Montreal Protocol Convention was assisted by the Montreal Protocol Multilateral Fund. As of late 1997, China had received the largest amount of money from the fund, some $149 million—or 26 percent of the total.

Too, China has received funding through bilateral agreements, usually for furtherance of international environmental conventions it has ratified. For example, in addition to UNEP assistance to compile a database for biodiversity conservation, under terms of CBD, several governments—notably the Canadian, Netherlands, Australian, Japanese, and American—have formed bilateral agreements with China and offered funding to pursue treaty objectives. In fact an important organization in the identification of biodiversity conservation problems and development of the China Species Red List, the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), was initially funded by the Canadian government.

Finally, a number of INGOs spend substantial sums on protection work in China. For example, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has spent US $4.5 million annually on a host of projects in northwest Yunnan Province, directed to species preservation. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), operating in China for nearly 25 years, spends nearly one-half million in conservation work annually. China has just two dozen INGOs, and most have been active only since the mid-1990s. They are especially valued for the funding they import for environmental work, collectively estimated to amount to US $100 million annually.

We lack firm data on the amount expended on environmental protection in China annually, but estimates range below 1 percent of GDP from domestic sources. A considerable part of China’s overall spending comes from abroad. Elizabeth Economy estimates that 80 percent of
China’s environmental spending originates from global institutions, foreign governments, or is funneled through multinational corporations or INGOs.

2. Building institutional and human capacity. China has been selectively receptive to foreign advice and recommendations, as well as to new environmental technology. The structure of environmental regulation (for example, establishment of environmental protection administrations) and environmental laws bears the imprint of global and national (American, European, and Japanese) practices. Many international environmental conventions, such as the Montreal Protocol discussed above, not only establish international structures to monitor compliance but also provide both technical and economic assistance to developing countries.

International business corporations have diffused environmental protection policies to China, and the impact of this source of change has accelerated as China has become more dependent on foreign trade, investment, and credit. China’s standardization laws have increasingly incorporated the recommendations of international commissions, particularly those of the International Organization for Standardization. This organization’s work largely is driven by companies in advanced industrialized countries. Thus, through both global processes of vertical diffusion, and individual national processes of horizontal diffusion, China’s participation in international conferences and conventions on the environment has built institutional capacity in China. 26

Both global institutional and bilateral relations that China enjoys with other states have also increased opportunities for development of human capacity in China. For example, the United States regularly invites personnel of the central government and selected provincial governments to attend environmental training sessions, as do governments of European states and the government of Australia. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a more visible role in development of human capacity than governments, but it is unclear whether their overall impact is more positive. We mention several recent examples of NGO training efforts.

China has a large number, perhaps as many as 350, government-organized NGOs (or GONGOs), usually housed in bureaucracies, which perform public relations, educational, and other environmental functions. One example is the Chinese National Committee for Man and the Biosphere (MAB), established in the mid-1980s to implement China’s membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) MAB program. Of China’s more than 2,000 protected areas, 26 have met the UNESCO criteria for inclusion in the global network, which qualifies them for government support and opens opportunities through exchanges for staff to learn about the operations of nature reserves in other countries.

National, Beijing-centered, NGOs sponsor some capacity-building programs in connection with their broader efforts in environmental education. But it is international NGOs that have the largest programs in capacity-building. As foreign-based NGOs, these organizations are operating under increased scrutiny from the regime, and most have reached memoranda of agreement with central government agencies, such as SEPA and the State Forestry Administration (SFA) or with provincial governments.

For example, The Nature Conservancy has now developed 15 project areas in northwest Yunnan Province. One of the primary goals of TNC’s Yunnan Great Rivers Project is to develop effective policies and build capacity among governments, communities and NGOs for sustainable conservation and economic development.27 Some 35-40 TNC program staff work with provincial government officials and with a host of grassroots NGOs, including women’s groups, cultural associations, indigenous knowledge centers, and newly formed village economic enterprises. A second example is Conservation International (CI) whose major project in China
is in the mountains of southwest China hotspot where it maps sacred sites, assesses their biodiversity values, documents and gathers indigenous knowledge and works with local grassroots NGOs to assist in their capacity building.  

INGOs not only provide training to enhance skills and knowledge of China’s environmental workers, but they also introduce new concepts of environmental management, such as co-management. As many INGOs work in areas of China with large minority populations, they have emphasized increased local, minority participation in environmental protection work, and sought to enhance empowerment of local peoples.

3. Protecting domestic political stability. Environmental movements and protests have been closely linked with democratization campaigns in many parts of the world. A clear fear of the Leninist party-state of China is that environmental groups, forming to address local and national environmental problems, will threaten the stability of the state through uncontrolled, autonomous action and become incubi of democracy.

Indeed, the Leninist state has much to fear from disorganized protests, which are estimated to number 170,000 in 2000 alone. Although most demonstrations have involved unemployed state industry workers and migrant laborers, environmental protests have increased. For example, in December 2005, some 300 residents of the south China village of Dongzhou, armed with spears, knives and dynamite, protested a power company’s plans to develop a power plant on their land, without agreed upon compensation. The economic development project would install a coal-fired generator, which would heavily pollute the village. Plans to fill in a local bay as part of the project would ruin a fishery used by villagers for generations; blasting a nearby mountainside for rubble to use in the landfill and fill in the bay would threaten biodiversity. Police violently suppressed the demonstrations, in the largest use of armed force against civilians since the Tienanmen protests of 1989.

One observer of China’s participation in international conventions and conferences argues that it betrays an anti-democratic impulse:

This embrace of Western and international standards stems in part from a reluctance to draw on either China’s indigenous traditions of environmental protection or on the ideas of non-governmental environmental activists . . . (It is) an attempt to limit the political role of environmental activists and to avoid a genuine degree of public participation in environmental decision-making.

China’s “indigenous traditions” of environmental protection include both the major Dujiangyan irrigation control program of the early Han Dynasty as well as periodic episodes of deforestation and pollution, and collectively do not provide an unmixed record of protection. However, it is clear that the regime pays careful attention to non-governmental organizations.

China’s NGOs are indeed carefully watched. In 1998, new regulations from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) reinforced the requirement that NGOs be sponsored by a state agency (which Chinese often refer to as a po po, or mother-in-law, because of the prospect that the agency will interfere in associational life), and excluded the opportunity for the social association to register as a business affiliate. Membership in the group was limited to 50 and it had to demonstrate fiscal responsibility. A group was required to seek separate registration in each place it operated, which effectively prohibited the growth of national associations not directly part of a national bureaucratic agency. Also, only one social association could register in the same area for a specific activity, such as environmental protection. Schwartz notes: “As a result, NGOs tread carefully, avoiding strong criticism of government environmental protection failures.”
The crackdown on the *Falun Gong* in 1999 had an even more chilling effect. In response to this and to the “color revolutions” in countries of the former Soviet Union, NGOs (and particularly those with international headquarters and local organizations receiving funding from abroad) have been under increased scrutiny from the regime. Yet, and this is where Palmer’s assessment falls short, NGOs are tolerated by the state, which seems to recognize the value of civic associations. As Secretary General of the State Council, Luo Gan, declared in 1998: “Government has taken up the management of many affairs which it should not have managed, is not in a position to manage, or actually cannot manage well.” He then proceeded to urge an expansion of “social intermediary organizations.”

4. **Curling unsustainable economic growth.** An additional beneficial effect of China’s participation in international environmental conferences and conventions pertains to stabilization of the Chinese economy. The vehicle is Agenda 21 and the regime’s adoption of the sustainable development concept.

The United Nations’ Brundtland Commission report of 1987, *Our Common Future*, made sustainable development a criterion of the effectiveness of environmental measures for all countries. The report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the development of future generations.” The Rio Summit of 1992 formally adopted sustainable development as an objective for all nations, and enacted Agenda 21, a large and complex blueprint for global social development and environmental conservation. These actions were reinforced in the Rio +5 meeting and in the 2002 Johannesburg Sustainable Development World Summit, which specifically called for national action plans. As noted above, China adopted Agenda 21 as a planning instrument.

The Chinese regime initially appeared to pay less attention to sustainability policies than rich states because of their apparent cost. Yet leadership warmed to the concept for several reasons: the rhetoric attracted further international support; it mollified domestic environmental critics (who questioned why China ranked 133rd among 142 countries in the Environmental Sustainability Report); it provided a way to address the overheating of the economy; and it gave a cachet of legitimacy to the new regime of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

In 2004 sustainable development entered economic planning as SEPA and the National Bureau of Statistics worked jointly to create a “green GDP” measure, which would subtract resource depletion and other environmental externalities from the GDP in order to illustrate the relationships between the environment and the economy. A related concept, the “circular economy,” focused on low energy consumption (as China surged into the international oil markets), low pollution and high efficiency. These are more applied iterations of the idea of sustainable development, and they integrate the planning of powerful agencies with environmental institutions.

5. **Enhancing China’s global reputation.** A final and perhaps the most obvious benefit to China from its participation in international environmental conventions and conferences is a boost to its international prestige. Environmental diplomacy typically is a “soft power” exercise: it connotes global responsibility; it does not require vast expenditures on armaments; and it involves nations cooperatively with others, in negotiations that may spill-over to resolution of other forms of conflict.

China has engaged in several environmental negotiations with the explicit aim of improving its international image. Geping Qu, head of China’s environmental agency in 1990 remarked that were China to fail to respond to international pressure on environmental issues, its global image would suffer and it would become more isolated internationally. In fact, Qu received
the UN’s $100,000 environmental prize in 1992 for his leadership in environmental protection work. Johnston suggests that China signed the Montreal Protocol in 1990 to improve its image with western states after the Tiananmen incident of 1989 as a means to demonstrate its dedication to the global common interest (redounding to China’s benefit).40

The Chinese media pay attention to the praise China receives for global environmental activism. Newspapers and TV programs cite approvingly virtually any commendation from international officials about China’s work. For instance, Cai and Voigts report a citation from the Chinese Environmental News repeating a UNEP official’s comments that:

China has set an example in environmental legislation. It is undoubtedly important to the world that China participates in various international conventions and treaties, which could not become universal without the presence of China.41

The title of a recent survey of China’s entry into international environmental conventions, “The International Promise of a Responsible Major Power,” captures the value China derives from these activities.42

Most of China’s participation in international environmental conventions falls into Johnston’s category of “relatively low cost and/or high profile” activism, aimed at improving China’s image as a responsible global power.43 This strategy has been one of considerable success.

Costs of Environmental Diplomacy

China’s extensive participation in international environmental conventions has not been without cost. There is a serious implementation deficit in enforcing environmental regulations, both those derived from international conventions and from domestic law, which can be attributed to problems of administration, financial resources, and training. There is a strategic imbalance in environmental planning as global aims confront Chinese realities. Finally, China’s current reliance on external support for environmental protection programs is unsustainable in the long term.

1. Implementation deficits. China’s environmental problems are vast, and would be daunting if it were a rich, economically developed nation-state. Even with the world’s fastest growing economy, experiencing GDP annual increases in the last 20 years of nearly 10 percent, China lacks resources—administrative, economic, and human—to comply fully with international accords to which it has acceded and with domestic environmental law and policy.

Part of the implementation difficulty is administrative and reflects problems of both vertical and horizontal management. At the central government level, environmental protective functions are divided among a large number of agencies. In addition to SEPA, ministries of agriculture, foreign affairs, construction, health, the forestry and oceans administrations—to name just a few—are involved in the administration of government policy. Moreover, the agencies with largest environmental responsibilities, such as SEPA, MOA, and SFA, are not among China’s strongest bureaucracies. Further, there tend to be few effective coordinating mechanisms to bring representatives of different agencies (and different missions), with responsibilities in the same general area, into an effective working relationship.

The problem of vertical integration is much more intractable, and mirrors the difficulty China has faced in coordinating economic development activities from the center to provinces and local governments. The problem here extends beyond the system of divided loyalties, with provincial and municipal environmental bureaus responding to both national and sub-national masters. It also reflects the difficulty of having different systems of incentives and values. As
one environmentalist remarked after visiting nearly 100 environmental protection bureaus in different parts of China:

There are many different local situations. The biggest factors is the drive for rapid economic development. Local governments want to develop the economy. And they want to measure the efficiency of their officials by economic development and not their conservation efforts. So they look at economic development needs first. Each local government administration has only 4-5 years to get promotions, and they focus on economic development. It is short-term, non-sustainable economic development, and that’s the main stress to the environment in local areas.  

There are few occasions indeed where a conflict between an environmental protection goal and an economic development opportunity is resolved to the benefit of the former.

We have mentioned the lack of sufficient financial resources to fund environmental protection work. At 1 percent of GDP, even at 1.5 percent, China’s expenditures on environmental protection are less than half of those in economically developed countries. This excludes resources made available through provincial and local government budgets, but notwithstanding the far larger number of environmental personnel at sub-national levels, budgetary resources to support them are even tighter.

Financial resources have an obvious impact on human capacity. Elizabeth Economy reports this example from Hebei province, which ranked 12th of 31 provinces/administrative regions in per capita GDP:

In 1994, the Hebei provincial EPB reported that almost 90 percent of its rural environmental protection officials were unqualified, and their offices grossly understaffed. Of 139 counties in Hebei, only 17 had first- or second-rank environmental protection bodies (i.e., those legally empowered to enforce environmental protection laws). Therefore, only 12.3 percent of environmental protection offices at the county level could enforce the law independently.

Our research into the management of protected areas in China indicated a similar pattern. Resources to fund operating costs (including paying salaries of personnel) were grossly inadequate, forcing cash-starved managers to be entrepreneurial—to the extent of cannibalizing the resources they were employed to conserve. Of equal or greater importance, environmental conservation staff lacked adequate training. A survey of 1088 staff members in nature reserves in southwest China (facilitated by Conservation International) revealed these staffing conditions:

- Regular staff members comprised 46 percent of the total number of workers only;
- nearly all nature reserves lacked specialized staff in ecosystem, habitat and species management, field patrol and monitoring, public environmental education and law enforcement;
- about 80 percent of staff had less than 10 years experience; nearly half began work less than five years previously;
- just over 10 percent of staff had bachelor’s degrees; an additional 45 percent had specialized secondary work or some college work (through adult education).

Staff capacity was least satisfactory in areas such as ecosystem, habitat and species management, project development and management, and technology and information management, areas related to the prime function of nature reserves.

All countries have implementation deficits in the administration of environmental protection policies, and China’s are perhaps no greater than those of other economically developing nations.
Nevertheless, these deficits present obstacles to compliance with international and national conventions and laws.

2. **Unintended consequences of the environmental strategy.** China has wisely argued for differential treatment in the melioration of environmental problems as a negotiating condition in acceding to important international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol. The terms of the treaty, which would be extraordinarily difficult for China to enforce at present, do not come into effect for Annex 2 nations (China, India, other economically developing countries) until substantially later than the immediate development of emissions targets for developed country signatories. Similarly, at the 2002 Johannesburg Sustainable Development Summit, China aligned with other mega-diversity developing nations, such as Mexico. With respect to these two large international conventions, China has been able to take advantage of the existence of a separate set of rules based on national development.49

However, China’s strategy of playing a major international actor while arguing for “common but differentiated responsibility” has a cost in other international governmental organizations, such as the World Trade Organization. While China did receive some preferences and delayed deadlines upon joining the WTO in late 2001, this organization’s rules allow countries to erect trade barriers to environmentally sub-standard products, including those from China, and environmental standards failing to meet international norms. Estimates are that approximately $4 billion in Chinese products have suffered such adverse effects.50

Also, China’s linkage of its environmental objectives to a global agenda of issues and roster of organizations does not always square well with the realities of Chinese environmental problems. Sometimes, the imposition of global standards works against the regime’s immediate interests, but in a way to advance the interests of the disadvantaged in China and the broader environment. For example, in construction of the $4.3 billion Nanhai Petrochemicals Project, local and provincial government officials paid little attention to compensation for 8,000 displaced persons and their resettlement. The multinational oil company building the project (Shell) was able to apply World Bank guidelines on resettlement (including monitoring of the process every six months), the first time such standards had been used in China.51

On other occasions, the international focus works against environmental needs in China. One example is conservation of China’s symbolic endangered species, the Giant Panda. A number of international environmental organizations worked with the government to establish the Wolong reserve and in it a panda breeding and research program in 1959. The Wolong center is the recipient of millions of dollars in receipts from INGOs and from China’s “rent-a-panda” program.52 Yet recent reports point to the continuing decline in critical habitat available to pandas, as a consequence of growing human populations and encroaching commercial activities within nature reserves. Jianguo Liu et al. reviewed habitat extent over the 30 years of the establishment of the Wolong reserve and found an increase in habitat loss and fragmentation.53 A panda specialist, critical of the focus of the Wolong reserve on the breeding center instead of the intrinsic value of the wild animal itself (and its critical habitat) remarked: “Now people are looking up to Wolong. It has millions of RMB in its budget . . . . We need to use more appropriate methods.”54

3. **Unsustainable reliance on foreign aid.** As mentioned, approximately 80 percent of China’s environmental protection budget comes from abroad.55 We have considered several cases of aid tied to environmental protection projects, and mention one area here—biodiversity conservation. International environmental organizations support a great deal of this planning. The Global Environmental Facility invested $18 million in the management of nature reserves.
It also has invested in wetlands biodiversity conservation and in the Lop Nur Nature reserve (which protects wild camels among other species). As Xie Yan notes: “By June of 2003, GEF has provided or approved about $400 millions to China projects . . . in which about 13 percent are used for biodiversity conservation.”

The governments of Britain and the Netherlands, among others, have invested in nature reserve projects, as have a number of international environmental non-governmental organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Conservation International (CI), and TNC. However, much of this funding is one-time-only. It tends to emphasize capacity building, resource investigation, and environmental education efforts, yet monies sometimes are used for infrastructure construction too. There is no guarantee that international donor agencies will make long-term commitments to nature reserve management or to species preservation.

Conclusions

At the birth of the global environmental movement in the late 1960s, China was still absorbed in the Cultural Revolution. It did not join the United Nations until late 1971 and participated modestly in international conventions and conferences until the late 1970s. Then, corresponding with China’s entrance into the world market, it participated broadly in environmental meetings and accords. By the early twenty-first century, China has sponsored nearly two dozen international environmental conferences, and signed more than 50 important environmental treaties or conventions.

China’s accelerated participation in environmental diplomacy is a reflection of its perceived national interest. It sought foreign economic assistance in order to help solve domestic environmental problems. It joined conventions to improve its institutional and human capacity. Interrelationships with IGOs and INGOs could also be said to have improved domestic political stability for the Leninist regime. Some environmental programs and concepts, particularly Agenda 21 and sustainable development, were of use to China in putting a damper on the overheated economy. Finally, China’s active participation internationally brought some praise to the state and could be said to have enhanced its global status.

These benefits of international participation were not cost-free. China’s behavior could be called revisionist in one sense, as it fostered the concept of “common but differentiated responsibility,” and joined with other economically developing states to seek the very best terms for the world’s less advantaged nations. To do otherwise, for example to have signed the Kyoto Protocol on exactly the same terms as Japan and the European Union would have sacrificed China’s short and near-term interest in rapid economic development.

In most other respects, however, China’s behavior has been similar to that of other status quo powers. Indeed, China’s participation in conventions and conferences has strengthened the legitimacy of global environmental negotiations, and the contemporary international relations system as a means to reducing tension arising from trans-boundary environmental conflicts.

1 The paper is the first of a three-part series on Chinese environmental diplomacy. The second paper will be presented at the Chinese Political Science Association conference of January 2007 in Taipei. I thank Dr. Bo Wang for assistance in securing materials on China’s environmental diplomacy.

2 See, for example, Vaclav Smil, China’s Environmental Crisis (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

6. This section follows the discussion in Gerald McBeath and Tse-Kang Leng, *Governance of Biodiversity Conservation in China and Taiwan* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2006), 72-5.
16. For example, Art. 8 calls for countries to establish representative systems of protected areas; Art. 7 requires member countries to monitor biodiversity and conservation activities; and Art. 17 obliges countries to share such information globally.
27. The Nature Conservancy, China Program, April 2004 report.
35 See Nick Young, “NGOs will have to ‘negotiate the state’ for some time yet,” China Development Brief, vol. IX, no. 5 (June 2005), 3, and “Under Scrutiny,” China Development Brief, vol. IX, no. 7 (September 2005), 1.
36 Quoted in Saich, 2000, 128.
40 Ibid.
44 Personal interview with NGO representative, Beijing, June 11, 2004.
45 Chan, 2006, 166.
46 Again, estimates vary on the number of environmental protection personnel in provinces, cities, townships, and villages. Elizabeth Economy estimates that there are 2,500 environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) spread throughout China, with 60,000 employees, but that if offices at the township and village level addressing environmental protection are included, the numbers increase to 11,000 agencies and 142,000 personnel. See Economy, 2001, 109.
49 For a review of the negotiating positions of the Chinese delegation to these conferences, see Zhija Wang, Global Environmental Issues and China’s Environmental Diplomacy (in Chinese) (Beijing: Environmental Sciences Press, 2002).
52 Pandas sent abroad to foreign zoos are effectively leased, with the proceeds returned to the Sichuan breeding program.
54 Personal interview with zoologist, Beijing University, January 12, 2005.
55 Quoted also in Chan, 2006, 167.
56 Xie Yan, Wang Sung and Peter Schei, China’s Protected Areas (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2004), 285.