

Geographical



Beijing Olympics 2008

China's 'bewildering complexity' through its massive population and rapid pace of economic and industrial advancement means that it has become a matter of fascination for its own people and the rest of the world. With the 2008 Olympics being held in the Chinese capital Beijing, the country finds itself in the centre of the media spotlight.

This edition of Geographical Eye will look at China as a rising economic powerhouse and the associated environmental stress on The Yellow River.

The economic dragon



China's recent industrialisation and urbanisation in the past two decades is one of the most rapid and dramatic advancements the world has seen.

For the past three decades China's economy has grown at an average annual rate of nearly 10 per cent, and more people

have been lifted out of poverty than any other country, at any other time. China's rapid economic growth has earned it the name of 'economic dragon' creating a sense that has a threatening presence in the world economy.

The Chinese modernization programme was set in motion with the fall of the Maoist rule and end of the Maoist period of isolation. The 'open door policy' of the 1970s exposed China to the foreign world allowing foreign trade, investment and the influx of modern thinking into the traditional setting of China.

A new world superpower?

It has been proposed that China will supersede America as the world's largest economy by 2045. The Chinese nation is no longer a 'pawn' of the Euro-American hegemonic force, but a significant player in global capitalism. The rise of the economic dragon has significantly challenged the Western domination of the global economic system.

The United States has often been understood to be a hegemonic world superpower, the dominant player of a unipolar world political system. The power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War provided space for the US to assume a hegemonic role. There was the sense that the US was the sole remaining superpower who could order the world without effective opposition. The roaring economy of China has destabilized this sense of Euro-American dominance.

The dark side of growth

The fascination and awe of the Chinese economic boom has long overshadowed the environmental crises brewing in the country. China faces a great plurality of environmental problems which include: air pollution, water pollution, desertification and biodiversity loss. Environmental crisis represents the dark side of the economic miracle in China.

Jasper Becker in the National Geographic (May 2008 edition) has proposed that the Chinese have not so much been creating an economic superpower as committing ecological suicide.

China is now the world's leading emitter of carbon dioxide and with 1,000 additional cars being added to Beijing roads every day the problem looks set to escalate.



Traffic gridlock in Beijing

Car ownership is a symbol of freedom and status, buying a vehicle has become a milestone of success in China. The very symbol of economic success is an environmental threat in terms of air pollution and greenhouse gas emission.

The Yellow River turns Red

In November 2006 a stretch of the Yellow River turned to a vivid red shade due to the chemical waste from local pharmaceutical factories.



The toxic-red Yellow River

The Yellow River or Mother River is a hugely important cultural symbol. It is known as the 'cradle of civilization' and has a great cultural significance as the emblem of the Chinese nation. Today the Yellow river can be more accurately described as a cocktail of chemical, waste, pollution and sewage. The paradise of the Yellow River is disappearing fast, being swamped and pumped full of waste. The very instruments of China's economic miracle: factories, farms and urban areas are ruthlessly fuelling an environmental crisis.

Water resources have long been a precious resource in the populous country of China. China has roughly the same amount of water as in the United States, yet five times the population. The scarce resource of water is becoming increasingly polluted and 50 per cent of The Yellow River is now deemed undrinkable

The future economic prosperity of China will be reliant upon the sustainable management of the environment, since the environment and economy are interrelated. The countries of the world must engage with pioneering new ways of thinking about how to live more harmoniously with nature for both environmental and economic benefits.

Susan Clarke