

## ***Breathing Air with Heft: Legal and Cultural Responses to Environmental Degradation in China***

*Erin Ryan*

I am beginning work on a book that synthesizes previous academic research on Chinese law and environmental governance into a book for more general audiences. It explores the intersection of daily life and environmental law in modern China, an industrial powerhouse still struggling to reconcile economic opportunity with breathable air, clean water, healthy food, and safe products. With a comparative perspective provided by analogous challenges in the United States, the book reports on these critical domestic challenges for China at a pivotal moment in its reemergence as a dominant world power. China's continued geopolitical rise may well hinge on its ability to respond successfully to the environmental causes of growing social unrest. The book shares this story while illuminating the different cultural lenses with which two representative Eastern and Western societies have navigated their relationships with nature, as well as exploring the different approaches they are taking to improve environmental stewardship.

In recounting the Chinese experience of water pollution, air pollution, food safety, and waste management, the book offers insight into the dynamic relationship between deteriorating conditions on the ground, simmering public pressure, and the Chinese government's efforts to rebalance economic growth and environmental protection in a series of new legal reforms. It combines academic analysis with experiential reporting based on extended in-country research from 2011-12 and a return visit in 2016. It also offers a unique perspective based on my experiences raising a three-generation American family in China while conducting my research. Coming with a full family provided access to the foundations of every-day Chinese culture that unattached visiting professors never encounter—from full engagement with public education and health care to the cultural rituals of parenting and intergenerational impacts of family planning. Drawing from this rich reservoir of ordinary life infuses the project with writing as experiential as it is academic—not just the legal particulars of monitoring fine particulate air pollution, but also how life changes when you are physically immersed in those particulates day after day.

The account of the evolving nature of Chinese governance will be partnered with analysis of regulatory pitfalls and concrete proposals for reforms that would directly improve the lives of the 1.4 billion Chinese people currently suffering in China's degraded ecosystems (and everyone else with stakes in the global ecosystems impacted by Chinese policy making). Just as important, the book will paint a picture of the remarkably rich and staggeringly complex cultural context in which these dilemmas are playing out—one that will enable readers to more effectively empathize with the struggles faced by Chinese people and policymakers alike. Finally, the book will explore the cultural gaps that Chinese and western partners will inevitably encounter as we work together to solve environmental challenges, facilitating a depth of intercultural understanding that will yield more effective international collaboration.

*Up the Rope Ladder, Down the Red Slide* is named for an anecdote shared early in the book about my family's experience of Chinese preschool education, which became a lens for understanding many other facets of Chinese society and governance more generally. My goal is to tell the story of the remarkable transformations underway in modern China and to reflect on

China's future—in an engaging format that will both introduce the context to non-Chinese readers and help Chinese readers consider their path forward.