

## From Rural Transformation to Global Integration: The Environmental and Social Impacts of China's Rise to Superpower

Joshua Muldavin  
Thursday, February 9, 2006

*On February 9, 2006, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a meeting entitled "From Rural Transformation to Global Integration: The Environmental and Social Impacts of China's Rise to Superpower." The speaker was Joshua Muldavin, Luce Professor of Asian Studies at Sarah Lawrence College. Carnegie's Minxin Pei moderated the discussion. A summary of the event follows.*



Joshua Muldavin argued that China's rapid growth during the last two and a half decades has been built upon a base of environmental destruction and social decay. In this process, the state has lost much of its legitimacy with the country's majority, and is now challenged by direct and indirect forms of resistance. As China's global integration accelerates, he warns, this paradox of growth built on decay has created a shaky foundation for arguably the world's most important new superpower. Using a series of slides and drawing on his own experiences living and working in China, Dr. Muldavin discussed the changes in Chinese rural areas that have occurred since the institution of

reforms and their relationship to increased social unrest and environmental degradation. He suggested that the possible solutions to these challenges can be found in China's relative hinterlands.

Dr. Muldavin highlighted the rise of peasant resistance to development in Guangdong province caused by the confiscation of peasant land, with minimal compensation, for development into roads, factories, dumps, and suburban housing developments. Having lost much of their land, peasants are no longer able to feed their families. Faced with unresponsive local officials, peasants resort to protests. Yet, rather than addressing the root causes of these protests, the state instead has responded by disciplining the leaders of the protest movements and placating local government officials.

Environmental disasters are also common in China. While much attention was given to the benzene spill that affected Harbin in November 2005, most analysts failed to note the far larger impact water pollution incidents have on rural populations. As China's development advances, its hinterlands have served as a "dumping area" for Chinese growth. Dr. Muldavin argues that the rest of the world is implicated in these challenges because its demand for cheap Chinese products has encouraged a downward race to the bottom in which other countries must compete with China, which lacks sufficient environment and labor legislation, to produce cheap goods for export.

Dr. Muldavin concluded that China's environmental problems should not be seen as technical problems with technical solutions. Rather, China faces non-technical environmental problems that can only be changed by the way people throughout the world organize to produce and consume and by changing the policies that affect vulnerable people. Chinese policies have changed incentives and decreased scales of

production, leading peasants to rely on inefficient and unsustainable agricultural practices. Given its interdependence with China, the West must work to address these issues.

### *Question and Answer Session*

**Q:** In a comparative perspective, is this environmental decay unprecedented or is it normal to see urbanization happening on top of rural decay?

**A:** This question assumes that all countries proceed in a linear fashion toward urbanization, which may not be true. Some analysts support the ecological modernization theory, which holds that development and growth lead to innovation, which in turn results in the creation of technology to solve the problems created by growth. But this model is too optimistic. The solutions in China must come from the rural areas.

**Q:** By focusing on the weakest and meekest in society, does this argument challenge Deng Xiaoping's argument that it is acceptable for some to go ahead first so that China can prosper as a country, which has served as one of the fundamental principles of Chinese reform?

**A:** The problem is not that rural peasants are helpless or meek but that they are vulnerable. They are forced by circumstances to take a short-term view and adopt unsustainable farming practices even though they have the education and experience to know that these practices will damage their future livelihood. The challenge is to identify those policies that have changed the everyday practices of the people and led to their reliance on these unsustainable practices.

*Summary prepared by Danielle Cohen, Junior Fellow with the China Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

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Resources available for this event

#### **Issues**

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#### **Regions**

China Mainland

#### **Participants**

Joshua Muldavin

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