

China Emerges as the Yin and the Yang of the Global Warming Problem

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BEIJING -- Staring up at the dazzling, \$32 million screen of light-emitting diodes suspended above one of this city's luxury shopping malls, it's hard to see China as a struggling "developing" country.

Sitting on a stone ledge with 34-year-old Wai Shen Ching hundreds of miles away in the remote village of Bai Bulou, it's hard to see China as anything else.

Residents of this Hebei Province grassland community have no running water. Lately, devastated by drought, the village has had little water at all. Men in straw hats and blue Mao jackets smoke the days away because, they say, farming has come to a standstill.

"There's no water, and there's no way to get water," Ching says, tugging at his gray-and-white camouflage t-shirt as two women in the distance lead a herd of cows into a rocky pasture. "I don't think we have a future. I think it will be the same if you come back here in 10 years."

In a nutshell, China is at once the yin and the yang of the planet's climate problem. In Chinese philosophy, they are complementary opposites that describe the whole. The yin describes the inertia or the burden of getting a nation still mired in numbing poverty to change its polluting ways. The yang describes the positive force that Chinese leaders have begun to use to attack the world's largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

Villages like Bai Bulou are the ones Chinese leaders have in mind when they argue the country is too poor to reduce heat-trapping carbon dioxide emissions. This plateau town reflects a stark reality in China, where according to the World Bank, 21.5 million people live below the absolute poverty line, earning about \$90 per year. All told, about 800 million Chinese live in rural areas far from the Las Vegas-like shopping streets that visitors now marvel at.

Both Chinas are real. Here, the checkout line at the Calvin Klein in the glitzy Chongwenmen neighborhood snakes out the door. In Shenzhen, smiling waitresses tap lunch orders into hand-held computers. This is China with a \$7.8 trillion gross domestic product, on track to grow its economy another 8 percent this year despite the global recession. It is sitting on \$2.13 trillion in foreign reserves and holding more than \$1 trillion in U.S. debt.

"China is kind of a developed and a developing country at the same time," State Department climate envoy Todd Stern recently explained to Congress.

Stern's problem is that the current global climate change regime doesn't allow for this kind of nuance.

Under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the United Nations neatly sliced the world into two categories. In one, it lumped industrialized nations, like Japan, Australia, Europe and the United States (though it never became a party to Kyoto), all responsible for a history of carbon pollution, and required them to slash emissions.

In the other category: everyone else. The developing countries -- a grouping that includes China, Brazil and other fast-growing economies as well as poverty-stricken nations like Cameroon and Yemen -- were exempted from carbon-cutting obligations.

With a new treaty under consideration, the United States is demanding that the United Nations take account of a world where countries straddle easily defined classifications. In theory, others agree, but achieving a system that accomplishes that -- and treats China in a way that satisfies both Chinese leaders and members of Congress -- is one of the trickiest jobs ahead for negotiators.

"We recognize that China is not going to do the exact same thing that the U.S. is going to do, but China's got to do a lot," Stern said. Reaching a deal in Copenhagen this December, he insisted, heavily depends on entrenched U.N. interests casting away "an ideology that the likes of China and India can't do anything more than Angola."

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