

Critical Review of Mol's Environment and Modernity in Transitional China

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Abstract

Although more than ten years have passed, Mol's article about Chinese ecological modernization issued in 2006 is still influential in academia. This article is a good material for academics and policy-makers who want to grasp overall information about Chinese environmental reform, practice and achievements. However, the author does not clearly answer all questions he requested, misses some useful information to strengthen his arguments, and there also emerges a doubt that whether and to what extent the notions of EM in developed countries are of any use in industrializing societies.

Keywords

Environmental Protection; Ecological Modernization; China.

1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, many researchers and politicians have held pessimistic and negative views on the Chinese environmental trend and development. However, some more optimistic and positive opinions have emerged in the western academia after 2000 (Yee et.al. 2013). This article, *Environment and modernity in transitional China* [1], is typical one of this kind of trend, written by Arthur P. J. Mol in 2006, Chair and professor in environment policy at the Department of Social Science, Wageningen University, who is one of the foremost scholars in the environmental sociology. In this article, the author tries to answer the question, whether the western ecological modernization (EM) framework is suitable for developing countries and whether Chinese environmental reforms could be regarded as EM or not. After compared Chinese practice to European modes, as the title of the article indicates, the author's answer is pretty positive (although, at the same time, he points out that China shows a different mode and style).

2. Background

Since the concept "ecological modernization" emerged in the western societies in the 1980s' (Mol & Sonnenfeld 2000), the pragmatic research has gained scholars' favour. At first, most of studies were focused on western countries. As the European Union, in 1992, required EU's policy cultivate "the sustainable economic and social development of the developing countries" (the Maastricht Treaty 1992, cited by Pustelnik 2014, p. 26), after that, the researcher's interest turned to the third world. Since then, one key question has been repeated whether the western mode is suitable for the newly industrializing world. Among them, the representative researches are Sonnenfeld's (2000) case study on South-east Asia, Frijns et al. (2000) on Viet Nam and Andersen (2002) on Eastern Europe. However, those case studies' results showed that the western path had, conditionally, its limited value in this area. Of course, just several case studies cannot settle down the query. The searches for the answer have continued. Mol's article is one of them.

3. Summary

At the beginning of Mol's article, the author depicts briefly the origination and process institutionalization of EM in developed societies, and their diffusion in some developing countries. Then, the key question is raised that to what extent the modes and styles of EM in western society are useful in industrializing countries. Then, the author narrates the conceptualization process of EM in European environmental social science literature. With citing a great number of previous studies, the article deduced that there is a basic feature of EM theory. That is "the centripetal movement of ecological interests, ideas and considerations within the social practices and institutional developments of modern societies" (p. 33).

Based on this recognition, the author, with the help of information classification and footnote, elaborates the development process and characteristics of environmental practice in western and China respectively at four aspects (political modernization, economic actors and market dynamic, civil society and international integration (only China)). Then, some positive evidences showed in these four elements in Chinese environmental reforms. They are: a) a significant decentralization and a transfer away from strict environmental governance and hierarchy; the division between state-owned firms and governments, b) the cancel of subsidies on natural resources, the introduce of environmental fees and tax, and the attention to environmental factors in market, c) the rise of government-organized NGOs, the increasing pressure from local people on environmental problems, and the informal social norms' influence, d) the growing openness and integration in the global economy. Eventually, based on those features, the conclusion is drawn that China is in the process of EM. But, at the same time, the article also points out that it shows a different style and mode compared to western countries. Most of these opinions above can also be found in author's another paper, *China's Environmental Governance in Transition*, published in the same year.

4. Critique and Valuation

It is worthy to mention that Mol's article draws its conclusion quite logically, by adopting qualitative analysis and deductive reasoning with a plentiful of profound peer-reviewed journals, government reports and statistic data. The author first abstracts the basic criteria for EM. Then, the western societies' exercises are employed as exemplification to justify the criteria, as these core features are shared in the real practices. Following this, the author enumerates the changes, achievements and problems in Chinese environmental reforms in four elements mentioned above, in which some features demonstrated are in line with the basic criteria. According to these findings, the conclusion is naturally obtained.

Another important point is that the article demonstrates a broad and deep insight into Chinese environmental employment. It provides not only the general history of Chinese environmental reform and practice since 1970s, but also the administrative changes, governance mode, political institution, economic market variation, social convention and public participation in Chinese environmental processes. At the same time, it analyzes the problems and their underlying background and causes. For example, the author argues that the reasons which restrict the public from getting involved in environmental policy-making in China result from absence of environmental monitoring, information transferring distortion, isolation from environmental data, the lack of right-to-know and restricted internet use, which shows the author's profound knowledge in Chinese environmental issues.

Although Mol's article sounds reasonable and plausible, but there are still several blemishes or questions which deserve to be drawn attention. Firstly, there is a question, can we surely believe China is on its way of EM after reading this article. As the author said it is difficult to define the key feature of EM, because it is still in developing and there are some "competing"

arguments (p. 32). So, how the author proves his criteria is objective and just is a question. York & Rosa (2003) argues the definition should be not merely the demonstration of institutional changes, should also show the eco-transformation of production and consumption with high periodicity due to modernization, no expansion of one industry's impact on environment while the reduction in another industry, and the speed of resource efficiency beyond the increase of whole production, which sounds like a criticism to Mol's definition. Additionally, there is also no consensus of how to define the yardsticks of measurement in developing societies. Frijns et al. (2000) employs three factors (state-market relations, technology development and environmental awareness) on Viet Nam case study, and Andersen (2002) utilizes two elements (environmental indicators, political and institutional developments) on east Europe case. Their results are not very positive. That may indicate that using different modes or definitions may obtain different results, which brings the reader doubts, how can we judge objectively the EM conditions of industrializing countries? Is the outcome of this article completely reliable?

Moreover, the answer in Mol's article to another significant question is quite vague and unclear. That is whether and to what extent the notions of EM in developed countries are of any use in industrializing societies? The question is posed by the author in the abstract and introduction of the article. Actually, the author does not give a direct and clear reply or even a plainly qualitative answer to it. Even through Mol and Sonnenfeld (2000) argues in 2000, to this point, that 'some processes of ecological modernization are global (even while others are not), and thus this body of theory remains at least partially relevant around the world' (p. 11), as to Chinese case in this article, such a general and abstract answer does not make sense.

Finally, it might have been useful to provide more information about the Chinese environmental reforms and practices, which are significant in Chinese environment performance. For example, green GDP accounting was conducted since 2004 by State Environmental Protection Administration of China (SEPA) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2006) to evaluate the socio-economic development, the emerging and development of fork think-tank since 2001 (Liu 2005), the release of Environmental Protection Administrative Permission Hearing Regulation by SEPA (2004) and the spreading of social media (China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development 2013).

5. Conclusion

Mol's article was written by the utilization of a great quantity of evidences and materials, providing a wide scope and deep perception in Chinese environmental institutionalization, transformation, governance, political and social perplexity, which makes it a good material for academics and policy-makers who want to grasp overall information about Chinese environmental reform, practice, achievements, institutions, arrangements, culture frames and underlying problems. However, there are still some shortcomings which cannot be ignored. They are, the author does not clearly answer all questions he requested, misses some useful information to strengthen his arguments, and the article may not totally satisfy the readers' questions, are the criteria impersonal? Whether we can positively assert without doubt that China is in the community of EM in 2006?

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