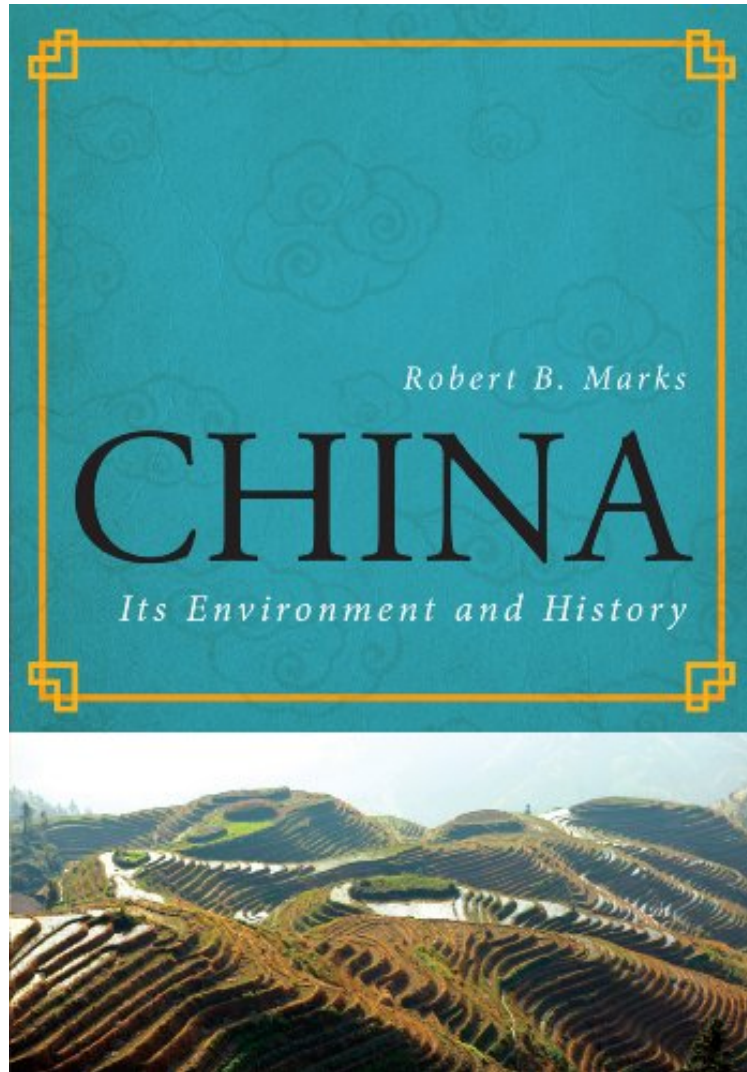


[Library ebook] China: Its Environment and History (World Social Change)

## China: Its Environment and History (World Social Change)

*Robert B. Marks*

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**Robert B. Marks : China: Its Environment and History (World Social Change)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised China: Its Environment and History (World Social Change):

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Superb jobBy E. N. AndersonChina has finally received a thorough, reliable treatment of its environmental history. Robert Marks is a veteran historian of China's ecological changes, and here has collected an enormous amount of knowledge. He records a sad but inexorable progression of deforestation and consequent erosion, siltation, desertification, and biodiversity loss: a real Greek tragedy, the damage inevitable because of China's demographic, economic and political expansion over the millennia. However, Marks also

points out that China developed a sustainable agricultural system, or rather a number of them. Also, many minority peoples had ecologically excellent systems of their own. In imperial dynastic times, China had an ideology of appreciation for and "harmony" with nature. This did not stop the deforestation and intensive land use, but it certainly did moderate the effects thereof (e.g. by maintaining forests around temples). Marks notes important conservation writings several hundred years BCE, and many actions--inadequate but better than nothing--since then. Unfortunately for China, the Communists introduced a western idea of "struggle against nature." The result has been incalculable damage since 1950; vast effort has been focused on transforming the environment, often for no good reason, and always with little thought of the future. The difference from old China, with its careful management and consequent slow (if ultimately horrific) decline, is striking. China's vaunted economic growth in the last couple of decades is mostly paper growth; the damage to the environment and to health is not adequately counted in the figures, and probably offsets the benefits to the fortunate. Outside of minor typos and the like, I found nothing inaccurate or misleading in this volume. It really is a quite amazing achievement, far superior to (for instance) Mark Elvin's book *THE RETREAT OF THE ELEPHANTS*, which is an uneven series of essays rather than an adequate history. Marks has collected a great deal of valuable reference material--population figures, maps, statistics--otherwise scattered and hard to find. Marks has drawn together a great deal of hard-to-find information on forests, coal, siltation, deer, everything--making this an indispensable reference volume for anyone seriously interested in China's economy or ecology. Environmental history of China is a young field, and almost every aspect of it would repay further research. An explosion of critical editions and scholarly translations of early works (such as the *Huainanzi*, *Lushi Chunqiu*, *Mozi*, and *Guanzi*) now allows us to dig far deeper into early conservation attitudes. The amazing find of a long and detailed government edict on conserving resources, from almost 200 years BCE, translated in *EARLY CHINA* recently (2009) by Charles Sanft, shows how much we have to learn. Researchers will need Marks' new book at their elbows.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The best book so far on China's environmental history. By lyndonbrecht This is another book that deserves more readers. China is three million square miles and 1.3 billion people, and for two thousand years or so that means a fifth to a fourth of all humanity. Understanding China is important, and Marks' book offers a compelling analysis of the interaction of the Chinese people and their environment. The diversity of the country is amazing but the environmental history is one of repeated overexploitation and catastrophe. It must be noted that much of the area of current-day China is quite recently Chinese, so history more properly is of all the peoples who have lived in what is now considered to be China. These would include Tibetans, Mongols, the varied peoples of Xinjiang (several spellings of this), Manchus, Koreans, and a whole raft of peoples native to the Yunnan and adjacent areas. Marks may have tried too much in his book. The immense and varied area, the size and complexity of the peoples over thousands of years probably requires several volumes to address it all. An important point is that this history is in a way, intensifying, with the Three Gorges Dam and the clear intention of developing several of the major Southeast Asian rivers that originate in China--including the Mekong and Salween.

This deeply informed and beautifully written book provides a comprehensive and comprehensible history of China from prehistory to the present. Focusing on the interaction of humans and their environment, Robert B. Marks traces changes in the physical and cultural world that is home to a quarter of humankind. Through both word and image, this work illuminates the chaos and paradox inherent in China's environmental narrative, demonstrating how historically sustainable practices can, in fact, be profoundly ecologically unsound. The author also reevaluates China's traditional heroic storyline, highlighting the marginalization of nature that followed the spread of Chinese civilization while examining the development of a distinctly Chinese way of relating to and altering the environment. Unmatched in his ability to synthesize a complex subject clearly and cogently, Marks has written an accessible yet nuanced history for any reader interested in China, past or present. Indeed he argues successfully that all of humanity has a stake in China's environmental future.

Based in part on the author's earlier, more technical book, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China* (1997), this new volume presents for a more general audience the parallel story lines of episodic and long-term ecological damage and the equally long-term success of the Chinese agricultural system. Marks (Whittier College) clearly highlights the symbiotic relationship between family farming and the strategic interests of the bureaucratic state since the Qin and Han empires, and stresses the interactive role of 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' in 'China's' agricultural and ecological change. He places the People's Republic of China at the end of an environmental saga in four premodern stages: the growth of millet-based farming communities in the Neolithic period; the rise of the imperial state from 1000 BCE to 300 CE; the rise of high-yielding wet-rice agriculture from 300 to 1300 CE; and the increasingly unsustainable population growth of the late empire from 1300 to 1800. Marks concludes with the modern era, focusing on the PRC's huge organizational capacity to industrialize the Chinese economy. He very capably sifts through the immense secondary literature on Chinese social, political, economic, and environmental history to present a very useful synopsis of the state of the field. Summing Up: Recommended. Most levels/libraries. (CHOICE) Robert Marks's book is a superb synthesis of the English-language literature on Chinese environmental

history. In eight succinct but fact-filled chapters, Marks covers the entire period from ancient China to the present in a fluently written, balanced, and accessible manner. For the first time, general readers can gain a sophisticated overview of Chinese interactions with their landscapes, their manipulation of natural resources, and their exploitation and destruction of both. Anyone seeking to understand how the long course of China's history has produced the current environmental crises must consult this book. . . . Marks devotes three of his eight chapters to the last two centuries, embracing the entire period of industrialization, revolution, and devastation. No one has covered the modern period in such insightful detail. . . . Its continuous story of intensified environmental pressure, as documented in this brilliant analysis, carries disturbing lessons of all of us. (Peter C. Perdue *Journal of Asian Studies*)

A broad survey of Chinese ecological history that encompasses more than 4000 years, Robert Marks *China: Its Environment and History* provides a much-needed bridge between narratives of China's political, social, and economic history and its environmental history. It focuses on the relationship between humans and the environment, and emphasizes the transformative impact of civilizational forces such as agricultural production, deforestation, and water management, on China's natural environment. Marks illustrates the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment by noting how human responses to natural forces, particularly climate change, instigated ecological transformations. Major themes include the ecological impacts of agriculture, warfare, technological advances, urbanization, the rise and fall of empire, and population growth. Intentional and unintentional effects of these anthropogenic forces include deforestation, soil erosion, flooding, the spread of disease, the depletion of natural resources, and the endangerment of wild animal species. . . . While the book's major focus is assessing the anthropogenic causes of environmental change, it is effective in presenting cultural attitudes towards the environment, from ancient ideas about nature to modern forms of environmentalism. . . . The individual chapters could supplement world history courses, as many general textbooks lack an assessment of East Asian environmental history. Overall, the book provides an ecological backstory that would complement any world history survey. (Middle Ground)

Marks makes some surprising revelations. . . . This book confirms that, for China at least, the genre of environmental history has come of age. . . . Marks writes from secondary sources, they are myriad and his interpretations are striking. The attentive reader will come to view China's history with fresh eyes. (*Journal of Historical Geography*)

The volume deserves to be included on Chinese environmental history and global environmental history syllabi at all levels, and provides a valuable reference tool for anyone seeking to better understand interactions between environment and society in China's past. . . . Undoubtedly, Marks's survey will stand as the best available introduction to China's environmental history for quite some time. A brief overview can hardly begin to capture the volume's empirical richness. (*Environmental History*)

This is the first book to cover the Chinese people's relationship to nature and the environment throughout their history, from Peking man to the present. It is a joy to read, clear and accessible to anyone with or without background in Chinese history. Marks gives the big picture of the use and depletion of resources, highlighted by many revealing details. His scholarship and experience make him a dependable guide to China's fascinating ecological past and its present impact on the world environment, in which China announces the importance of environmental improvement while it is the world's leading consumer of energy and largest source of carbon pollution. (J. Donald Hughes, University of Denver)

In this book, Marks does what no scholar has done before: provide a comprehensive environmental history of China from the most ancient times up to the 21st century. The book is accessibly written, clearly organized, and utterly indispensable for anyone hoping to make sense of the tumultuous relationships between society, culture, and nature in China. (J. R. McNeill, Georgetown University)

This is a book for just about anybody: clear enough for a general reader with little background and nuanced enough to please any specialist. Marks explains the remarkable ways in which millennia of human activity—sometimes careful, sometimes careless—have transformed China's landscapes and how the feedback of those changes has affected human affairs. He also shows that, though modern China has almost no 'natural' areas left, it has nonetheless remained a large and important reservoir of eco-diversity. In our own era, when Chinese production and consumption are also shaping territories far from home, which, as Marks shows us, has also happened before—these are stories of the utmost importance; they are told here in a way that every reader should profit from. (Kenneth L. Pomeroy, University of Chicago)

**About the Author** Robert B. Marks is Richard and Billie Deihl Professor of History at Whittier College.