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[Home](#) > [China's environmental suicide: a government minister speaks](#)

# China's environmental suicide: a government minister speaks

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China's deputy environment minister, Pan Yue, tells Andreas Lorenz that China's economic miracle is creating an ecological crisis.

About the author

Andreas Lorenz is a reporter for the German news magazine [Der Spiegel](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

**Pan Yue, born in Jiangsu region, is [deputy director](#) <sup>[9]</sup> of the State Environmental Protection Administration in the People's Republic of China, and a member of the Leading Party Group of the Communist Party of China**

**Andreas Lorenz:** China is dazzling the world with its booming [economy](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, which grew by 9.5%. Are you pleased with this speed of growth, and what effect is it having on the environment of China?

**Pan Yue:** Of course I am pleased with the success of China's economy. But at the same time I am worried. We are using too many raw materials to sustain this growth. To produce goods worth \$10,000, for example, we need seven times more resources than Japan, nearly six times more than the United States and, perhaps most embarrassing, nearly three times more than India. Things can't, nor should they be allowed to, go on like that.

**Andreas Lorenz:** Such a viewpoint is not exactly widespread in your country.

**Pan Yue:** Many factors are coming together here. Our raw materials are scarce, we don't have enough land, and our population is constantly growing. Currently, there are 1.3 billion people living in China – twice as many as fifty years ago. In 2020, there will be 1.5 billion people in China. Cities are growing but desert areas are expanding at the same time; in these fifty years, habitable and usable land has been halved.

**Andreas Lorenz:** Yet, in the eyes of the world, each year China strengthens its reputation as an economic wonderland.

**Pan Yue:** This miracle will end soon because the environment can no longer keep pace. Five of the ten most polluted cities worldwide are in China; acid rain is falling on one third of our territory; half of the water in China's seven largest rivers is completely useless; a quarter of our citizens lack access to clean drinking water; a third of the urban population is breathing polluted

air; less than a fifth of the rubbish in cities is treated and processed <sup>[9]</sup> in an environmentally sustainable manner.

## China's economy, China's environment

**Andreas Lorenz:** How great are the effects of this degradation of the Chinese environment on the economy?

**Pan Yue:** It's massive. Because air and water are polluted, we are losing from 8-15% of our gross domestic product. This does not include the costs for health and human suffering: in Beijing alone, 70-80% of all deadly cancer cases are related to the environment. Lung cancer has emerged as the number one cause of death.

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**Andreas Lorenz:** How is the population reacting to these health problems? Are people moving to healthier parts of the country?

**Pan Yue:** Even now, the western regions of China and the country's most ecologically stressed regions can no longer support the people already living there. In the future, we will need to resettle 186 million residents from twenty-two provinces and cities. However, the remaining provinces and cities are able to absorb only 33 million people. China, in short, will have more than 150 million ecological migrants, or, if you like, environmental refugees.

**Andreas Lorenz:** Has China's government tried to get pollution under control?

**Pan Yue:** Yes, it has. In some cities, such as Beijing, the air quality has recently improved. Also, the water in some rivers and lakes is now cleaner than it has been in the past. There are more conservation areas now, and some model cities – like Haikou <sup>[9]</sup>, on Hainan island, and Zhuhai <sup>[9]</sup>, in Guangdong province – focus specifically on environmental protection. We are replanting forests. We have passed additional laws and regulations that are stricter than in the past and they are being more rigorously enforced.

**Andreas Lorenz:** But the fanatics for economic growth in Beijing will still likely carry on just as before.

**Pan Yue:** They're still playing the lead role – for now. For them, the gross domestic product is the only yardstick by which to gauge the government's performance.

But this attitude entails two further mistakes. First, we are convinced that a prospering economy automatically goes hand-in-hand with political stability. I think that's a major blunder. The faster

the economy grows, the more quickly we will run the risk of a political crisis if the political reforms <sup>[16]</sup> cannot keep pace. If the gap between the poor and the rich widens, then regions within China and the society as a whole will become unstable. If our democracy <sup>[9]</sup> and our legal system lag behind overall economic development, various groups in the population won't be able to protect their own interests.

Second, we assume that economic growth will give us the financial resources to cope with the crises surrounding China's environment, raw materials, and population growth. But there won't be enough money, and we are simply running out of time <sup>[9]</sup>. Developed countries with a per capita gross national product of \$8,000-\$10,000 may think like that, but we cannot afford to. Before we reach even \$4,000 per person, different crises in all shapes and forms will hit us. Economically, we won't be strong enough to overcome them.

**Andreas Lorenz:** You have advocated the introduction of a different criterion to measure the condition of the economy and environment in China: "green gross domestic product." What does this mean?

**Pan Yue:** This is a model <sup>[9]</sup> that takes into account the costs of growth, like environmental pollution for example. We are discussing it with German experts. We want to assess the performance of functionaries in relation to how they solve environmental problems and social issues as well as to economic growth matters.

### **China's state, China's citizens**

**Andreas Lorenz:** Does your agency have the power to clamp down on environmental criminals?

**Pan Yue:** We recently shut down thirty projects <sup>[9]</sup>, including several power plants – one of them at the Three Gorges Dam <sup>[9]</sup>. The companies involved failed to review what effect their new investments would have on the environment, as required by law.

**Andreas Lorenz:** But twenty-six other projects were allowed to carry on. They only had to pay small fines – peanuts compared to the billions that were invested.

**Pan Yue:** Unfortunately, that's true. This is why our laws and regulations must be reformed. But even though we have little power <sup>[9]</sup>, we will close down illegal projects, including economically powerful steel, cement, aluminium and paper factories that break regulations and damage the environment in China. And we will ignore the agendas followed by influential officials and companies.

**Andreas Lorenz:** Many environmental offenders in China have large amounts of cash or are taking advantage of their political connections.

**Pan Yue:** My agency has always gone against the grain. In the process, there have always been conflicts with the powerful lobbyist groups and strong local governments. But the people, the media, and science are behind us. In fact, the pressure is a motivator for me. Nobody is going to push me off my current course <sup>[9]</sup>.

**Andreas Lorenz:** China lacks a grassroots <sup>[9]</sup> movement to protect the environment. So far, its citizens have very little opportunity to stand up against questionable projects. Courts sometimes don't even accept the suits that the people are filing, and voicing opposition is not allowed.

**Pan Yue:** Political dialogue and shared decision-making should be part of any socialist

democracy. I want more discussions with the people affected. However, I do not want to put on a show just to look democratic to the outside. We need a law that enables and guarantees public participation [9], especially when it comes to environmental projects. If it's safe politically to get involved and help the environment, then all sides will benefit. We must try to convince the central leadership in Beijing of that.

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This interview, conducted by Andreas Lorenz and translated from German by Patrick Kessler, was originally published [9] in the English edition of *Der Spiegel*.



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