

Op-Ed Columnist

Bring in the Green Cat

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times Thomas Friedman.

Chongming, China

I've been a regular visitor to China since 1990, and here's what strikes me most: Each year that I've come here, China's people seem to speak with greater ease and breathe with greater difficulty.

Yes, you can now have amazingly frank talks with officials and journalists here. But when I walked out of my room the morning after I arrived in Shanghai, the air was so smoky — from the burning of farm fields after the harvest — that for a moment I honestly thought my hotel was on fire.

And that's why, for the first time, it's starting to feel to me like China is reaching its environmental limits. If it doesn't radically change to greener, more sustainable modes of design, transport, production and power generation, the Chinese miracle is going to turn into an eco-nightmare.

For some three decades now, China's economy has grown at around 10 percent per year, based on low-cost labor and little regard for the waste it pumps into its rivers and the air. When a country grows that fast, year after year, it can start to think that the laws of nature don't apply to it.

Guess again. China has been doing the environmental equivalent of jumping from an airplane and thinking that it's flying, argued Rob Watson, an expert on China's environment who heads the green building services firm EcoTech International. "After you jump out of a plane, for about

five miles you can actually feel like you're flying," he added. But then reality hits. "It's not the fall that kills you — it's the sudden stop at the end, and China may be approaching that sudden stop. ... When you stress a system to a certain point, it just stops working."

China's top leaders understand the crisis. But their response is complicated by so many Chinese flooding from the countryside to cities. In their view, political stability depends on finding those people jobs, and jobs depend on growth, and growth depends on China continuing to be the low-cost producer of everything — environment be damned.

But China can't do what the West did: grow now, clean up later. Because the unprecedented pace and scale of its growth are going to make later too late. The China Daily reported this week that at least 24 million acres of cultivated land in China — one-tenth of the country's total arable land — is now polluted, posing a "grave threat" to China's food safety. More than half its rivers are also polluted, which is why less than 9 percent of "drinkable water" met government standards for bacteria in 243 rural supply stations recently tested. Many wells have excessive nitrates that can cause diabetes or kidney damage. No wonder some high-tech workers are starting to avoid China, because they don't want to live in a dirty cloud.

Chinese officials fear that if they move to U.S.-level green production and environmental cleanup, "China will not be such a low-cost producer anymore, and that will affect jobs," noted Dan Rosen, an expert on China's economy and head of China Strategic Advisory. But what they are missing is that going green is not just a problem, but an opportunity. Pollution represents waste and inefficiency. Green companies are always more efficient, adds Mr. Watson, and China has a chance to become a major innovator of low-cost green solutions. When U.S. companies went green, they consistently overestimated the costs and underestimated the savings.

The other day, I sailed with Mr. Rosen from Shanghai up the Yangtze Delta to Chongming Island, the world's largest alluvial island. There, Shanghai is trying to expand, by building the first eco-metropolis in China, based on eco-tourism, farming, wind and solar power. When you see the parklands created there, or when you stand in the protected wetlands and watch the water buffalo lounging in the mud, while peasants collect crabs, you can almost believe that China can change course.

But then, off in the distance, you see this massive bridge that is about to connect Chongming to central Shanghai, and you wonder what will happen to all the green plans here when all the overloaded trucks and consumers start rushing in. If Chongming is just a green ornament attached to Shanghai, it will never survive. If it is a model for a whole new kind of development, it, and China, have a chance.

Deng Xiaoping once famously said of China's economy: "Black cat, white cat, all that matters is that it catches mice" — i.e., forget about communist ideology, all that matters is that China grows. Not anymore, said Mr. Rosen. "Now the cat better be green, otherwise it is going to die before it catches the mouse."