

[Luo on Sun, 'Certifying China: The Rise and Limits of Transnational Sustainability Governance in Emerging Economies'](#)

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Yixian Sun. *Certifying China: The Rise and Limits of Transnational Sustainability Governance in Emerging Economies*. Earth System Governance. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022. 276 pp. \$35.00

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Reviewed by Weiwei Luo (Florida State University) **Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (January, 2023)
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Yixian Sun's book, *Certifying China: The Rise and Limits of Transnational Sustainability Governance in Emerging Economies*, is part of the series Earth System Governance, edited by Frank Biermann and Oran R. Young. This series is related to the long-term international research program "Earth System Governance Project" and is designed to study the integrated global solutions by which humans govern their relationship with the natural environmental and global biogeochemical systems. The books in this series combine local inquiries and global perspective, with the goal of enhancing understanding and finding potential improvements and reform. Overall, Sun's book provides concrete and persuasive answers to the question, Can China become more sustainable? It is thus a timely and vital contribution to conversations about sustainability inside and outside academia.

In the last few decades, China, with its massive population and a rapidly developing economy, has figured prominently in global discussions about environmental governance. In this book Sun aims to show the potential and limits of a "new governance mode in driving the world's most populous country toward sustainable production and consumption" (p. 2). Eco-certification has become a popular means of promoting sustainable production and consumption internationally. But how can we get Chinese businesses to adopt voluntary transnational standards and practices? The significant role of the state in the Chinese economy suggests that measures beyond the market need to be studied closely in order to understand the actual dynamics at work. Sun concludes that eco-certification can be an effective method of bringing China increasingly into the global movement of sustainable consumption and productivity; crucially, we need to recognize that Chinese state actors might sometimes be allies to transnational governance because of their role and interests.

Following the introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 discusses the nuts and bolts of transnational sustainability governance in China, which, as Sun rightly points out, is driven by both market and political forces. The author's framework on page 33 (fig. 2.1) will be particularly useful to many readers, as it succinctly illustrates the stakeholders in bringing international rules into Chinese industries and how they could generate incentives for the adoption of these rules. Sun also identifies the two types of state actors who are most likely to support transnational governance: subnational governments and national industry associations. Proactive engagement with these domestic actors,

the author suggests, could help bridge North-South and private-public divides. Dr. Sun also lists seven hypotheses regarding the mechanisms of promoting transnational rules, which he refers back to periodically in later chapters.

The following three chapters examine in detail the three main commodity chains in China and their respective dynamics of transnational certification. These case studies will be of particular interest to readers who want in-depth information on specific types of eco-certification programs and the processes of their implementation in China. In chapter 3, Sun explains the regulatory structure of the seafood industry, especially a quasi-state national industry association—China Aquatic Products Processing and Marketing Alliance (CAPPMA)—supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture, which played an important role in promoting sustainable seafood certification in China. This contrasts sharply with the importance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the global North and the pattern of the bottom-up civil society movement. Recent success in this arena is a result of crucial CAPPMA connections with central government organizations as well as efforts by transnational certification programs to proactively engage with CAPPMA. Chapter 4 studies the entry of a transnational certification program—the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)—into China's palm oil industry. As in the seafood industry, proactive engagement with a quasi-state trade association, in this case the China Chamber of Commerce of Import and Export of Foodstuffs, Native Produce and Animal By-Products (CFNA), has provided access to large numbers of Chinese companies. However, the palm oil industry also demonstrates the limitations of eco-certification in transforming the Chinese market, mainly due to low consumer awareness, high market competition, and the Chinese government's lack of interest in taking stronger actions to promote sustainable palm oil. Chapter 5 tackles the case of tea. Eco-certification programs for the tea industry in China have made little progress, especially considering the rapid global increase in certified areas and production volumes. The author sees this as a result of the specific structure of China's tea supply chain: a large domestic market lacking big brands and economies of scale. Based on these three case studies, the author summarizes that transnational sustainability governance has gained varying degrees of traction in China's commodity chains, with seafood being the most successful case in terms of the spread of transnational sustainability governance, and tea being the least successful, in no small part due to the differences in demand from domestic versus foreign market.

In the conclusion, Sun explores whether or not dynamics similar to those observed in China also exist in other emerging economies. Through three examples—soy certification in Brazil, fishery certification in Russia, and tea certification in India—the author demonstrates that even though emerging economies are major players in global value chains, they remain limited in their degree of involvement in transnational sustainability governance. The main takeaway is the importance of identifying key stakeholders in these countries. In China, the state actors tend to play a critical role in promoting new standards and practices, while NGOs have been largely missing in the politics among emerging economies. While admitting that the future is unpredictable, especially given the impact of the global pandemic, Sun offers a few scenarios where different state reactions may lead to very different outcomes.

This book exemplifies the series' ambition to both interest the academic community and inform practitioners and policymakers. It is an engaging introduction to China's major industries and their eco-certification for specialists in fields such as economics, political science, sociology, and environmental science. Specialists of China will particularly appreciate the extensive field research

and interviews included in the appendices. The book is clearly written and sign-posted, with statistical analyses presented in intelligible figures and charts, which all provide quick access points for non-academic readers. One particularly laudable effort that contributes to this accessibility is the author's choice to define key terms early on, such as "eco-certification" and "governance." In addition, Sun's close attention to informal institutions and personal networks adds valuable nuance to his argument.

I have a couple of minor questions from my own perspective as a historian and a legal scholar. Given the scale and focus of the book, these will not affect the validity of the book's research or argument, but may provide additional points for future conversations. First, Sun stresses the importance of international standards and their importation from developed countries to developing countries. Above the national level, who or what is most concerned about the operation of the global market and its ecological impact? Is it entirely accurate to characterize eco-certification as "a private tool governing global commodity chains" when the framework of "public vs. private" on a global scale presupposes a political and economic order that may or may not be applicable to many parts of the world (p. 174)? My second, related question concerns domestic forces in China. Because of the relative debility of NGOs and "civil society"—a nebulous and contested concept in the context of Chinese (and many decolonized countries') history—the author concludes that a sociopolitical environment that permits nongovernmental eco-certification does not exist in China. But what might be some alternative ways to locate potentially effective nongovernmental forms of activism in China? This will require us to interrogate the binary between public and private as both a conceptual framework and as labels purposefully deployed by the actors themselves.

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