

Margaret Wente

The real cost of China rising

[MARGARET WENTE](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Nov. 02, 2010 5:00AM EDT

It's tough to be an environmental activist in China. Just ask Dai Qing, a well-known dissident who's currently in Canada on a speaking tour. Her work is banned in China, and she's been thrown in jail. There are even signs that overseas Chinese are being heavily discouraged from turning out to see her in Canada.

"The whole world is talking about China rising," she says. "But at what cost?"

The cost includes environmental devastation on a massive scale. Eighty per cent of the country's rivers and lakes are drying up, she says. Sixty per cent of the water in seven major river systems is unsuitable for human contact. A third of the land is contaminated by acid rain. Two-thirds of the grassland have become desertified, and most of the forest is gone. Forty per cent of the arable land has been degraded by fertilizers and pesticides. Of the world's 20 most polluted cities, 16 are in China.

"In practice, the environment is owned by the state officials," she says. "Land grabs have become the primary means for officials to get rich."

Ms. Dai, an energetic 69-year-old, seems undaunted by the task of taking on the world's worst polluters. And now she and her fellow activists have received an enormous boost – the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo. Furious Beijing officials have called the award "a blasphemy." But she and other dissidents are heartened at such a powerful symbol of support from the rest of the world. Ms. Dai, who was with Mr. Liu at Tiananmen Square in 1989, says she cried when she heard the news.

Dai Qing has given up much to fight for her convictions. As the daughter of a war hero, and the adopted daughter of a top Chinese official, she grew up among the political elite. She was a staunch party member until the 1980s, when she became convinced that the massive Three Gorges dam project would be an environmental and human disaster. After her ground-breaking book on the dam was published abroad in 1989, she was thrown in jail for 10 months. Today, her opinion of the project is unchanged, and she points out that even the government is backing away from its claims about the dam's ability to control floods.

The current regime has now embarked on an even more ambitious project – a mighty effort to reroute the country's water supply in order to supply the thirsty city of Beijing.

Officials compare it to the construction of the Great Wall. Critics call it a monumental folly. “They are robbing the water of the rest of China to supply Beijing,” Ms. Dai told one Western reporter. “And it probably won’t work anyway.”

Ms. Dai paints an unflattering portrait of China’s new ruling class – the “Red Nobles,” as she calls them, who make substantial fortunes through connections, selling access and exploiting land secured from the central government. The Red Nobility is the new face of China – conspicuously wealthy and self-confident. Many of them have moved their cash and loved ones abroad. They continue to live in China – but they usually have several passports, just in case.

“The traditional Chinese ethic is gone from this society,” says Ms. Dai. These days, everyone is chasing money. Everyone wants a career as a public official because it’s the gateway to becoming rich. “In today’s China, with belief in neither traditional values nor the rule of law, money means everything to almost everyone.”

That’s grim news for anyone who imagines that China might be persuaded to embrace environmental responsibility any time soon. Even so, Dai Qing hopes that by exposing corruption and abuses of power – and by harnessing the powers of the Internet, no matter how the regime tries to censor it – dedicated activists will gradually be able to engage the broader public. “The only way, I think, is to tell the truth.”

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/the-real-cost-of-china-rising/article1781483/>