Perspective
Enabling a Rapid and Just Transition away from Coal in China

Gang He,1,2,* Jiang Lin,2,3 Ying Zhang,4 Wenhua Zhang,1,5 Guilherme Larangeira,1 Chao Zhang,6 Wei Peng,7 Manzhi Liu,8 and Fuqiang Yang9

1Department of Technology and Society, College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794, USA
2Energy Analysis and Environmental Impacts Division, Energy Technologies Area, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA
3Department of Agricultural and Resources Economics, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA
4Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing 100028, China
5School of Economics and Management, North China Electric Power University, Beijing 102206, China
6School of Economics and Management, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China
7School of International Affairs and Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16801, USA
8School of Management, China University of Mining and Technology, Xuzhou 221116, China
9Natural Resources Defense Council China Program, Beijing 100026, China
*Correspondence: gang.he@stonybrook.edu
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2020.07.012

SUMMARY
As the world’s largest coal producer and consumer, China’s transition from coal to cleaner energy sources is critical for achieving global decarbonization. Increasing regulations on air pollution and carbon emissions and decreasing costs of renewables drive China’s transition away from coal; however, this transition also has implications for employment and social justice. Here, we assess China’s current coal-transition policies, their barriers, and the potential for an accelerated transition, as well as the associated environmental, human health, and employment and social justice issues that may arise from the transition. We estimate that the most aggressive coal-transition pathway could reduce annual premature death related to coal combustion by 224,000 and reduce annual water consumption by 4.3 billion m³ in 2050 compared with business-as-usual. We highlight knowledge gaps and conclude with policy recommendations for an integrated approach to facilitate a rapid and just transition away from coal in China.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CHINA’S DEPENDENCE ON COAL
Human-induced greenhouse gas emissions are the main cause of average global warming of approximately 1°C since the beginning of the industrial era. The additional warming anticipated to continue in the future represents an imminent threat to human societies if it is not mitigated. Deep decarbonization of energy systems is needed to avoid the catastrophic consequences of climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), keeping global warming within a 1.5°C overall target (approximately 0.5°C warmer than today) requires global net anthropogenic CO₂ emissions to decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 and to reach net-zero emissions by around 2050.1

Coal is the largest source of global energy-related CO₂ emissions. Coal accounted for 44% of the 33 GtCO₂ of global energy-related CO₂ emissions in 2019, of which two-thirds came from coal use for electricity generation.2 Achieving the 1.5°C target set out in the Paris Agreement requires coal and other fossil fuels to be phased out in the next 30 years. The scale of this transition would be unprecedented given the heavy dependence on fossil energy at present: 84.3% of the world’s primary energy consumption in 2019 came from coal (27%), natural gas (24.2%), and oil (33.1%).3

China’s dependence on coal is a major hurdle to global decarbonization. In 2019, China accounted for about 28.8% of the global energy-related carbon emissions.4 Coal has been the fundamental fuel behind China’s economic growth and the spread of electricity access to its entire population.5 China is now the world’s largest coal producer and consumer—consuming half of global coal production and importing 20% of the global coal traded in 2018.5,6 It is also the world’s main international provider of finance for the building of new coal-fired power plants.7 Coal accounted for 60% of China’s primary energy consumption in 2018, contributing 50% of the country’s fine particulate matter (PM₂.₅) pollutants and 70% of its carbon emissions.8

Coal’s dominance in China’s energy mix has created severe environmental and public health consequences.9 Outdoor air pollution has been a leading risk factor for mortality, contributing to an estimated 1.2 million premature deaths in China in 2017.10 Dispersed coal combustion from small burners and residential uses are the main cause of heavy pollution in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei metropolitan area.11 Burning 1 metric ton of scattered coal discharges 10.7 kg of PM₂.₅ and 10.2 kg of SO₂: the emission rates are 49 times and 9 times higher, respectively, than...
those of coal-fired power plants. In 2017, indoor pollutants emitted by Chinese households burning coal caused about 750,000 deaths from respiratory diseases.

As such, coal is at the center of enormous energy, environmental, and climate challenges in China and worldwide. China's transition away from coal is critical to addressing the global climate challenges as well as national and regional challenges related to air pollution, human health, and social and environmental justice. Here, we propose an integrated approach to accelerating China's transition away from coal. China's ability to manage a rapid and just transition away from coal toward a lower-carbon energy system will have an outsized influence on global climate change mitigation and sustainable energy for all.

CURRENT POLICIES AND BARRIERS

China has introduced a series of policies to curb coal consumption and its impacts (Figure 1). In 2013, The State Council released the Action Plan on Prevention and Control of Air Pollution, which planned to constrain direct coal consumption to 65% of primary energy by 2017 through a combination of alternatives (coal to gas, coal to electricity), renewables, and energy efficiency measures. In 2014, China planned to limit coal's share in primary energy to 62% by 2020 while introducing an ultra-low emissions policy for new coal-fired power plants to limit PM, SO\(_2\), and NO\(_x\) emission concentrations to 10, 35, and 50 mg/m\(^3\) by 2020, respectively, which is equivalent to the performance of gas turbines. In 2015, China announced plans to reach peak carbon emissions by no later than 2030 while deriving 20% of its primary energy from non-fossil sources in preparation for the Paris climate talks. These goals were integrated into China’s nationally determined contributions to Paris Agreement emissions reductions. In 2016, China released the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) for its energy, industry, and power sectors, which proposed coal savings and policies to improve efficiency, close backward mines, aid workers, and cap coal output, use, and coal power capacity during the planning period. In 2017, China’s National Development and Reform Commission released the Energy Production and Consumption Revolution Strategy, 2016–2030, which further detailed energy decarbonization targets including non-fossil primary energy shares of at least 15% (2020), 20% (2030), and 50% (2050) as well as reduction of carbon emission per unit of gross domestic product (GDP) by 60%–65% in 2030 compared with 2005 levels. In 2019, China’s National Energy Administration began implementing China’s Renewable Electricity Quota and Assessment Method with total and non-hydro quotas at the province level to fulfill the non-fossil primary energy goals.

These measures have achieved some positive outcomes. Coal use has flattened out since 2013 while overall energy use and GDP have risen (Figure 1), which demonstrates what an active and earlier coal-transition policy enacted in China could deliver. However, they appear to be inadequate for achieving the IPCC 1.5°C or even 2°C maximum-warming goals. Multiple models show that achieving these goals requires coal’s share in China’s electricity generation to approach 0% by 2050. Several barriers are impeding China’s rapid transition away from coal.

First, a rapid transition requires early retirement of substantial coal-generation capacity while canceling newly planned coal projects. China has been canceling planned coal projects since 2016 due to overcapacity and air pollution concerns, and canceled more than 130 GW of planned coal projects in 2019 alone. However, by the end of 2019, about 80% of China’s coal capacity was built after 2000. Many studies have shown that continued operation of existing coal plants is incompatible with the 1.5°C pathway. Hence, a rapid transition away from coal requires an earlier retirement of plants than would be necessary owing to purely operational criteria. The recent COVID–19 pandemic is closing the window for coal and speeding coal’s demise in the United States and Europe. However, in China the need for economic stimulus might relax investment in coal power, hence allowing for a continued role for coal in the near future.

Second, China’s coal consumption extends beyond the power sector. Power generation accounted for 58.8% of China’s total coal consumption in 2019, with the rest attributed to industrial
Despite the barriers, several developments and opportunities suggest that China has the capacity to accelerate its transition away from coal. The coal phaseout increasingly aligns with energy economics and public-policy priorities, particularly the urgent need to cut air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from coal combustion.

Coal consumption in China peaked in 2013 and has roughly plateaued since then. COVID-19 led to an immediate drop in coal use but this rebounded soon when economics were back on track. Slowing GDP growth, a structural shift away from heavy industries, and more proactive policies on air pollution and clean energy have all contributed to this plateauing effect. In 2017, China’s National Development and Reform Commission announced plans to cap coal power capacity at 1,100 GW and to stipulate a minimum average efficiency of 40% for all existing coal powerplants by 2020. However, China’s coal power capacity reached 1,040 GW by the end of 2019, which leaves only 60 GW space to grow if this policy is strictly adopted. Nonetheless, the introduction of a coal cap, even if the cap might be adjustable, is an indicator of the mindset shift from unconstrained coal expansion to coal control policy.

Declining costs for other electricity technologies are making a rapid coal phaseout more economically attractive. The costs of solar photovoltaics (PV), wind, and battery storage have decreased rapidly in the past 10 years. The global weighted-average levelized cost of electricity of utility-scale solar PV, onshore wind, and battery storage has fallen by 82%, 40%, and 87%, respectively between 2010 and 2019. Additional projected cost reductions would present opportunities for more aggressive renewable-energy deployment and power-sector decarbonization than assumed in previous policy efforts. For example, one study suggests that continued cost trends for renewables will result in 62% of China’s electricity coming from non-fossil sources by 2030 at a cost that is 11% lower than achieved through a business-as-usual approach. China’s power sector could halve its carbon emissions (compared with 2015 levels) at a cost about 6% lower compared with a business-as-usual scenario. Another recent study shows the technical and economic feasibility of phasing out China’s coal power plants by 2040 if all new electricity demand is met by non-coal generators and all existing coal generation is replaced with non-coal generation at least by the end of the original coal-plant depreciation schedules, i.e., beginning in the early 2020s. Co-benefits from reduced air pollution and water use also increase the attractiveness of a rapid coal phaseout. Air pollution control is a top priority for the Chinese government. For example, the implementation of Air Pollution Prevention and Control...
Action Plan—issued by the State Council of China in 2013—reduced annual average concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$ by 33.3% in 74 key cities between 2013 and 2017. The improved air quality in 2017 reduced deaths by 47,240 in the 74 cities, compared with mortality in 2013. Based on the coal consumption projections from multiple high-profile research institutions, we estimate that the most aggressive coal-transition pathway could reduce premature death related to coal combustion by 224,000 in 2050 compared with the business-as-usual scenario. Similarly, our maximum estimated reduction in water consumption is about 4.3 billion m$^3$ in 2050.

Figure 3 illustrates the ranges of potential impacts and co-benefits.

A JUST TRANSITION AWAY FROM COAL

Transitioning rapidly away from coal presents social justice issues, particularly concerning the potentially precipitous elimination of coal-related jobs. For example, in 2019, eight EU countries—France, Italy, Ireland, Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Finland—announced that they would phase out coal-fired electricity by 2030. While the transition is driven both by market economics and governmental regulations, such a short time frame is unlikely to give workers in coal-related industries sufficient time to plan for, retrain for, and transition to new, similarly remunerative careers without policy support. For this reason, the near-term sacrifice made by workers and affected communities for global climate stability merits societal assistance that goes beyond the usual welfare systems or social safety nets. Coal-transition support is therefore a necessary measure for coal workers and should be considered by policymakers in coal-dependent countries.

Coal-related employment in China has already been declining for years as China’s strategic plan to transition toward a more sustainable and service-based economy has undermined the economics of coal. After a decade of rapid expansion that helped power China’s boom, the number of workers directly employed in coal companies peaked at 5.3 million in 2013, dropping to 4.88 million in 2014 and 3.21 million in 2018 (Figure 3D). In particular, coal production and washing jobs started declining after the Chinese coal industry started to phase out older production capacity in 2016. Remaining coal workers are mainly those with relatively low education and skill levels, making further resettlement of laid-off coal workers more difficult. Many more coal-related jobs will disappear as the production efficiency of China’s coal industry improves through mechanization.

China’s coal-related jobs are distributed unevenly across provinces (Figure 4). For example, Shanxi is one of China’s largest coal-producing provinces. It possesses approximately one-third of China’s total coal deposits, and coal is considered
Employment is a key element of a just transition away from coal, which came to the fore following the Paris Agreement in the context of community renewal and the creation of high-quality jobs. When China initiated policies to shrink its coal industry, it established policies to mitigate the impacts on affected groups. The central government has promised to provide 100 billion Yuan (~14.3 billion US dollars) in total for redundant workers in coal and steel industries since 2016. In recent years, relevant government departments have introduced policies to promote the settlement and re-employment of coal workers. For example, the central government formulates specific employment-support policies for unemployed coal workers, providing them with free employment guidance, job placement, consultation, and other services. Some subsidies are offered to laid-off coal workers who have difficulty finding jobs immediately. State-owned coal enterprises should provide skills training, such as entrepreneurship training for former employees who are willing to start their own businesses.

A successful coal transition involves changes through the whole coal value chain transition. Various ancillary, upstream, and downstream industries will also decline during the coal phaseout, and thus a just transition applies to them as well. The power-generation sector, coal-transportation sector, and many other industries have already experienced structural adjustments because of China’s transition. Employment will also decline in the coal-fired power industry, which is China’s largest coal consumer. A 2010 study by the International Labor Organization estimated that, on average, 62 workers would lose their jobs for each 10 MW in capacity closure at that time, and only 10% of those would be re-employed in new capacities, with the remaining 90% requiring employment assistance. To assess the actual employment impact and tackle the issue along the coal value chain, analysis at finer geographic resolution and targeting each of the major corporations will be needed.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The scale and scope of China’s transition away from coal are unprecedented. Coal consumption peaked in the United Kingdom at 180 million metric tons of coal equivalent (MMTCE) in 1957 and in the United States at 780 MMTCE in 2007—only 6.4% and 27.9% of China’s coal consumption level at 2,810 MMTCE in 2013 as the peak to date. The ability of China to manage this transition in a rapid and just manner will have a significant impact on how China and, to a large extent, the world use energy and address climate change. Here we propose an integrated political-socioeconomic perspective targeting an integrated value chain to highlight a few overarching strategies and policy implementations to accelerate China’s transition away from coal. We
further identify important unanswered questions about the transition.

Creating a Task Force

A dedicated task force or commission should be mandated to facilitate the transition and serve the best interests of affected stakeholders, including the states, corporations, workers, communities, and consumers along the coal value chain. This commission should have as wide a societal and geographic representation as possible to ensure that all stakeholders are included. A special task force was designated in Germany, through the German Coal Commission (GCC), and in Canada, through the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers. In the German case, the GCC not only guided labor policies but also advised on the coal-plant retirement deadline. One way to jump-start such a commission in China would be to create a coal transition special task force in the already functioning National Energy Commission. The task force would produce long-term goals, strategies, and policy recommendations, and leave implementation and enforcement details to administrators and legislators. Because the transition will span over 30 years, it also makes sense to build flexibility into the task force, including periodic milestones and revisions.

Implementing Instrumental Policies

Several additional policies would accelerate the transition. (1) Manage demand growth through efficiency. Future coal capacity is responsive to future energy demand, and energy efficiency can reduce electricity consumption by as much as 5,000 TWh in 2050 compared with a business-as-usual scenario. (2) Restrict the construction of new coal powerplants. No new coal plant should be allowed when comparable clean energy alternatives exist, which is increasingly a reality as renewable costs decline and renewable electricity achieves grid parity. (3) Allow for earlier retirement of existing coal plants, prioritizing locations and plants where the operational economics are unfavorable. Adopt a rule for coal plants to retire no later than their decommission or depreciation schedule. (4) Phase out subsidies to the coal industry. China’s coal industry is already declining and shedding jobs, but continuing subsidies keep it competitive. Support to coal production and coal-fired powerplants include providing overseas financing for up to 24.5 GW of coal-fired power plants through the funding of the state-owned enterprises. Removing coal (and other fossil-fuel) subsidies would help alternative energy sources compete on a level playing field. (5) Significantly increase investment in solar, wind, and energy storage to continue driving renewable expansion and integration. (6) Build international partnerships on coal phaseout. It would be significant if China partners with other countries in a coalition or other forms of club to share strategies and experiences, support just-transition programs, scale up coal transition beyond the domestic efforts, and step up to global leadership.

Coupling of Transition Plans with Just Treatment of Workers and Their Communities

Just-transition measures should include retraining coal workers, especially those at the beginning of their careers, for economic activities aligned to the broader economic transition and diversification strategies. One example of a feasible re-employment activity would be a new public program for environmental restoration. Appropriate programs would require skill sets similar to those coal workers already have, or present low barriers to entry. Program funding could come from a tax on pollution and carbon emissions. Such an approach would also enhance social equity, yielding a double dividend by curbing emissions while funding the just transition. Additional just-transition measures should include enhancing the social safety net of health, retirement, and unemployment insurance at the national, provincial, and local levels. Support should be directed to workers, not corporations, otherwise it would merely be another form of subsidy to the coal industry.

Important questions about China’s transition away from coal remain to be answered, many of which revolve around the pace of technological innovation and societal changes. Disruptive technologies, such as nuclear fusion, might reshape the energy landscape and accelerate the coal transition, although uncertainty still surrounds the viability and potential timeline of commercial fusion. If coal has any future, it will be highly dependent on large-scale deployment of carbon capture, sequestration, and utilization—a technology that works but has not been proven economically viable at meaningful scales. Renewables and large-scale electricity storage have their limitations as well. Challenges include developing the materials, manufacturing, installation, and integration capabilities to enable those technologies to replace coal rapidly. The life-cycle environmental impacts of battery storage also require further investigation. Finally, the transition away from coal must overcome inertia related to established social, economic, and infrastructure systems.

As the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, one of the founders of Taoism, said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” China has taken its first steps to transition away from coal. The journey ahead will be a winding one—but, with effective plans and policies, it could be a rapid and just one as well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their comments and insights. We thank Jarett Zuboy for the edits. G.H. would like to thank David Hart and the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation for hosting the Energy Innovation Boot Camp for Early Career Scholars sponsored by the Sloan Foundation. This paper benefited from discussions with the participating scholars.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

G.H. conceptualized the research, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript; J.L. and Y.Z. helped conceptualize the paper and contributed writing; W.Z. assisted with data collection and analysis; G.L. assisted with literature review and writing; and C.Z., W.P., M.L., and F.Y. contributed conceptualization, comments, and revisions.

Published: August 21, 2020

REFERENCES


49. GBD MAPS Working Group (2016). Burden of Disease Attributable to Coal-Burning and Other Air Pollution Sources in China (Health Effects Institute).


74. Environment and Climate Change Canada (2018). A Just and Fair Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities (Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities).


