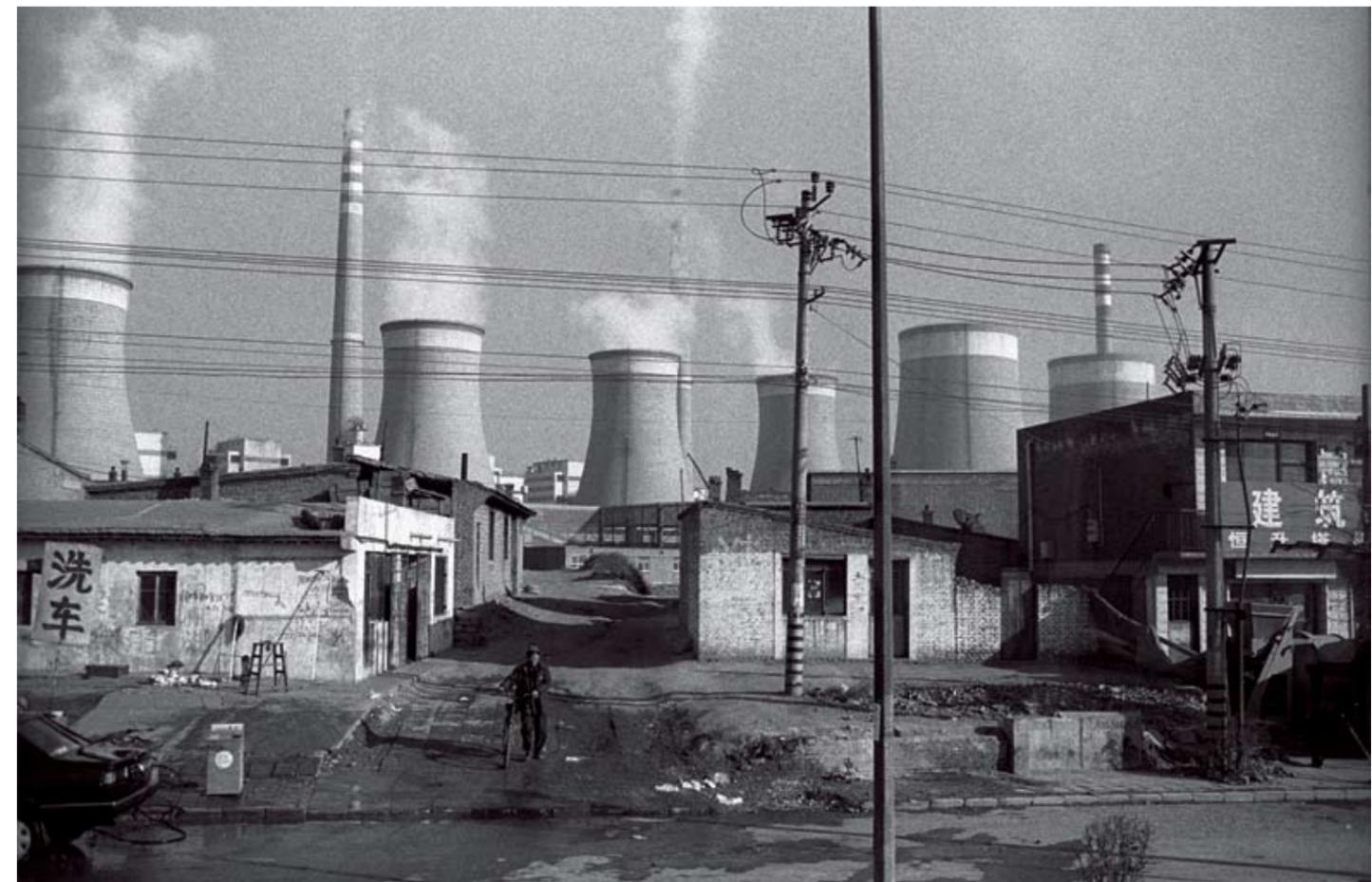
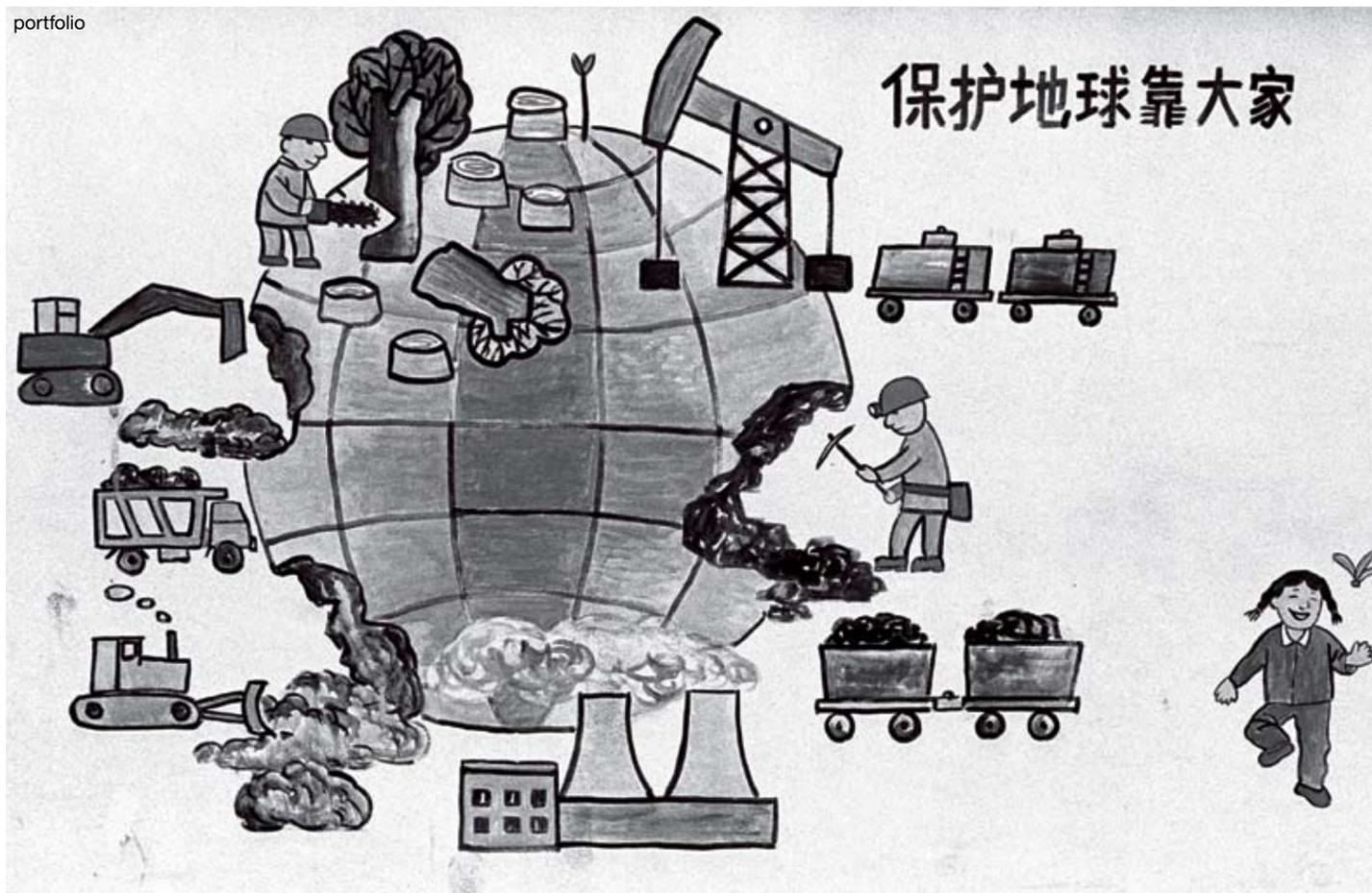


Dust and Ashes

DOWN & DIRTY IN CHINA

China's rise to superpower has been well documented, if not always understood. But in a reverse of the old adage of 'where there's muck there's brass', the industry powering the country's ascent is covering the country in clouds of dangerous dirt, which threatens to break more records than even the best Olympian.

Text & images by Teun Voeten



The sun doesn't shine anymore in Beijing. That is to say, it still shines, but is hidden behind the thick layer of smog that every morning engulfs China's capital, a bustling metropolis of 15 million people. Only on rare days, when climatic conditions are optimal, can a strip of blue sky be discerned. Millions of cars, charcoal heating, as well as China's ageing, heavily polluting industry are responsible.

This year, China will surpass the USA as main producer of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. China defends itself by saying that per capita, the average American still produces five times as much as the average Chinese citizen. However, if industrialisation and economic growth in China continue at the current rate, an ecological disaster is in the making. China's population is expected to peak only in the year 2050, when it has reached a total of one and a half billion people. A recent study concluded that 30 per cent of China's fauna is seriously endangered. The river dolphin, once a common sight in the Yangtze River, is now extinct. The Yangtze giant soft-shelled turtle is going the same way: only three of the crea-



tures remain. These last turtles are in the zoo, protected behind bullet-proof glass and under permanent video surveillance. Experts are desperately trying to get the animals to mate.

Shanxi is the most polluted province of China. It produces 30 per cent of the country's coal. Shanxi's coal capital, Datong, only 300km away from Beijing, boasts a coal-fuelled electricity plant that provides half of Beijing needs. In the big boulevards of Datong, three million inhabitants are packed into a middle-sized city; coal merchants on horse and cart defy a busy stream of traffic. Datong is proud of a world famous attraction: the Yungang Caves, where gigantic Buddha statues are sheepishly grinning to the thousands of visitors that throng the site. These days however, a thin layer of black soot covers the statues, soot that is coming from the Jin Hua Gong state mine, just a few miles down the road. For its part, the huge state mine is also trying to lure visitors with its enticingly named 'Mysterious Mining Underground Tour'.

Deeper south in Shanxi province is another tourist attraction: the ancient walled town of Pingyao, which looks like time came to a standstill five centuries ago. Tourist guides describe picturesque Pingyao very appropriately as the most atmospheric town in China. But hardly any visitors venture a few miles south, along the railroad to the industrial town of Linfen, where a gloomy industrial zone unfolds. It is a dark landscape where shepherds herd their sooty sheep through Dickensian alleyways. Rivers have become open sewers, covered with a strange smelling orange foam. The centralised politics of China can get things done. The evidence is Linfen, a city that a year ago topped the list of the ten most polluted cities in the world. On bad days, vision was only 60ft and most inhabitants donned mouth masks to protect themselves against the poisonous fumes, mainly caused by coal heating. But the government closed the most polluting industries and forced the citizens to switch to gas heating. Last winter, the skies turned blue again and face masks become an exception.

Maybe the Olympic Games will be a wake-up call for China. If the country doesn't change its course, it is highly possible that because of respiratory problems, few athletic records will be set. #