China is a country of superlatives – fastest growing economy, largest population, biggest clean energy investor and ranked number one for its carbon footprint. Environmental challenges, particularly air pollution, potentially undermine China’s economic dominance. China has long been open to international cooperation on environmental issues and working to promote such dialogues and collaboration is Dr Jennifer Turner. In her role as Director of the US-based Wilson Center China Environment Forum, she has worked to bring together experts from around the world to help China make the transition to a more sustainable development path.
When was the Wilson Center created and from what context did it emerge?

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars is the official Memorial to the 28th US President Woodrow Wilson, who was both a scholar and a policy maker. In his spirit, the Wilson Center seeks to bring together policy and scholarly communities from around the world to promote research and lively debates around a broad range of public policy issues. We are a ‘living memorial’ and pride ourselves in being a gathering place for some of the best and brightest scholars and experts from around the world.

What are the main focal areas of the organization? How is its presence felt on the world stage?

I'm excited to share with you that just last week the Wilson Center was ranked as the top 'Think Tank to Watch’ in the US and for the first time we were placed in the top 10 of global think tanks by the Global Go To Think Tank Index. This is a great testament to the richness of the Wilson Center, in terms of policy and geographic coverage in our 20+ projects and programmes. These fall into two categories: regional (eg. Asia, Middle East, Africa) and topical (eg. Environmental Change and Security Program, Comparative Urban Studies Project, Science Technology Innovation Program). Our projects and programmes carry out a lot of joint initiatives, bringing together our respective strengths and networks. Through public meetings and events, broadcast media and social media, print and online publications, and a wide range of outreach initiatives, the Wilson Center is engaged in the global dialogue of ideas.

In what capacity do you contribute to the Center and how have your career choices helped you to develop the skill necessary for your role?

I've been directing the China Environment Forum (CEF) for 14 years. I lead the Center’s work on all things related to China's energy and environmental challenges and work with my team to fundraise, design meetings, create exchanges and conduct research. My team and I also catalysed what is an expanding centre-wide initiative: Global Choke Point, which focuses on water-energy-food nexus issues in four continents.

I often tell people that I have the best job in Washington DC, for I get to work with energy and environmental experts from around the world who are focused on China's sustainability challenges. We pride ourselves on helping to empower the ‘movers and shakers’ who are on the frontlines of environmental policy in China – from NGO activists such as Ma Jun, the 2012 Goldman Environmental Prize winner and China’s foremost environmentalist who participated in my first research exchange, to top energy and water researchers in China's government think tanks and the business community around the world.

I lived in China (1987-89) and Taiwan (1989-1991) teaching English, and in the process learned how to speak the fabulous Chinese language. Knowing Chinese really helped me when I later undertook PhD research focusing on water policy dynamics in China. My job has enabled me to greatly expand my understanding of environmental policy issues in China and it is exciting for me to work with leading environmental practitioners.

Could you elaborate on CEF – why was it created and what has it achieved thus far? How do you deal with the cultural and economic differences between the two nations?

CEF was created in 1997, two years before I started at the Wilson Center, and one of CEF’s major roles is to serve as an information clearinghouse and matchmaker for policy, science and environmental experts in China and the US. We have helped many people find partners and ideas for work in China. We are listed by The New York Times as one of the top public resources on China and the environment. My programme’s long engagement with Chinese environmental policy, research, and activist communities has meant we’ve built up significant trust among a network of thousands of experts; and this trust has enabled us to conduct research and create compelling forums that provide insights into some of the positive and negative trends on environmental issues in China.

Our current research and convening efforts include: Choke Point: China – Exploring the water-energy-food nexus; Cooperative Competitors: Building New US-China Clean Energy Networks; Complex Connections: Environmental Impact of China’s Overseas Investments; and Public Health Alert: Water, Air and Soil Quality in China.

How is China working with the US and other countries to invest in clean energy initiatives and expand clean energy development?

The US and China have a long history of working together on clean energy issues, which is an area I have long believed holds many benefits for both countries, for we are the top energy consumers and CO₂ emitters in the world. Thus, the decisions both countries make on clean energy could have a major impact on the world in terms of global climate change and air quality. The latter being an increasingly serious challenge facing Chinese cities. Bilateral cooperation in this area got a great jumpstart in 2009 when President Barack Obama and then-President Hu jintao signed nine clean energy agreements. We’ve seen much more two-way dialogue in this area since then. Perhaps even more impactful on clean energy issues has been the role US NGOs – such as Natural Resources Defence Council, Energy Foundation and Institute for Transportation and Development – have had on encouraging clean energy policies, building capacity of stakeholders in China, and launching pilot projects.

In terms of clean energy investment, the Chinese government has created an impressive set of policies, regulations and investments to encourage the development of renewable energy, cleaner coal and energy efficiency technologies. Improved energy laws have created a big incentive for International and Chinese state companies to invest as the conditions are right for expanding the market. It has been intriguing to see China moving from being almost completely dependent on coal to the world’s largest investor in clean energy. I’ve lived the shift – I can’t help but remember back in the late 1980s when during the winter I would huddle around coal briquette heaters in the apartments of friends, sipping tea and inhaling the smoke! Now, I have conversations with Chinese clean energy companies and talk to environmental activists and researchers who are intent on creating incentives to catalyse huge reductions in the country’s coal dependence.

There is a growing concern over the world’s ability to feed itself, especially as meat consumption continues to grow. Have you explored ways to improve future food security and safety?

It is ironic that you ask this right now, as I recently scheduled a screening of a documentary by Chinese director Jian Yi for the 2014 DC Environmental Film Festival called What’s For Dinner?, which focuses on many of the health and environmental challenges around China’s meat production. CEF worked heavily on food safety issues in China back in 2007/08, putting on meetings and writing policy papers (‘Sowing the Seeds: Opportunities for US-China Cooperation on Food Safety’ and ‘Surf and Turf: Environmental and Food Safety Concerns of China’s Aquaculture and Animal Husbandry’). We organised a delegation from China's Ministry of Science and Technology to the US, not only to give talks, but to meet with US business and government representatives and learn about some of the challenges and successes they have had...
in promoting food safety. You could say we still ‘dabble’ in food issues through our work examining water and soil pollution problems. We will be diving deeper into food issues in the coming year as we still believe this is an underdeveloped area of US cooperation with China. Like energy issues, how China and the US deal with food safety has global impacts.

Do you build ties with other organisations, businesses or policy makers?

Like other projects and programmes at the Wilson Center, building networks among diverse policy communities is core to our work. If you look at our speaker lists and authors in our publications you’ll see a great cross section of energy and environmental experts from the business, NGO, research and government spheres. At the Water-Energy Team Exchange in China in August 2013, our team members were made up of a dynamic mix of Chinese and US NGOs, research and government experts on water-energy issues who gave great talks to Chinese businesses, energy and water think tanks and environmental activists.

Choke Point: China is your latest initiative. Why was it established and how might lessons learnt be of benefit to other countries?

For the past three years we have worked on this initiative with a Michigan-based NGO called Circle of Blue. The project is grounded in extensive research and reporting in China through interviewing energy and water experts across all sectors and gathering data on how energy development was impacting China’s vulnerable water resources. We were the first to estimate that 20 per cent of China’s water goes to coal production. Most of China’s coal is in the dry north where growing cities, agriculture and industry also vie for water, so the coal-water choke point is big and growing. But it’s not all ‘doom and gloom’, we focus on solutions by creating dialogue and exchanges with Chinese and US energy and water professionals to examine water and energy confrontations in China.

Our work has already inspired the Chinese government, international and Chinese NGOs, and think tanks in China to conduct intensive research on the topic themselves, and in the past year the Chinese government has begun to raise water-coal nexus issues in high-level policy. We will publish a China Water-Energy Roadmap later this year to highlight priority research and policy gaps to enable China to begin addressing the country’s growing water-energy confrontations.

We have taken our insights on this topic to work with our Asia Program and Environmental Change and Security Program to launch Choke Point: India. The first Choke Point: India reports are online and we’ll be producing more, making a short film, and convening in India later this year. Every country faces different kinds of water-energy choke points, but in most countries it is an issue that has been overlooked. We are hoping to work with other programmes at the Wilson Center to expand our Choke Point work to other countries. Check out our Global Choke Point brief on our website to learn more.

Both the Cooperative Competitors and Complex Connections nodded towards the ‘green economy’ concept. What are their respective purposes and could they become model initiatives for other countries?

Our Cooperative Competitors work has been investigating opportunities for improving US-China clean energy cooperation and we are engaging with the business communities in both countries. Our next publication and meetings will examine some of the obstacles to Chinese clean energy foreign direct investment (FDI) in the US.

Complex Connections meetings and publications have sought to broaden the understanding of the environmental impact of China’s overseas investment, emphasising that it is not simply a case of uncaring Chinese firms, rather the whole global supply chain plays a role. For example, up to 50 per cent of Chinese timber imports are thought to be illegal and while there are a number of initiatives to help create transparency in sourcing and sustainability certifications, consumers inside and outside of China rarely consider where the trees came from in their paper and wood products.

You can also look at textile production in China, which can be quite polluting of the water. Notably around 25 per cent of the country’s textile production is for export, so consumers outside China ‘benefit’ from inexpensive clothes without bearing the cost of toxic water. We helped highlight the Clean by Design work by the Natural Resources Defense Council that is helping small and medium Chinese textile companies adopt low- and no-cost methods to limit pollution. So this is a supply chain issue that definitely needs more attention and we hope our work will help highlight such models for other organisations to adopt. Over the years, I think we have been very successful in disseminating information on effective strategies for engaging China on environmental issues. Like other projects at the Wilson Center, we aim to produce knowledge for action.

In mainstream media, more attention is paid to research in the West than the East. Do you envision this changing? How is the Wilson Center leading the way?

The full name of our Center is the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and every year hundreds of scholars and other professionals from around the world compete for 25+ fellowships to come to our Center and conduct policy research. We pride ourselves on helping to give a voice to researchers and policy practitioners from around the world, not only through our fellowship programme, but through our meetings and publications.

The Center also recently launched a Ground Truth Briefing series, which provides a platform for thousands of former Center scholars and fellows from around the world to share their unique viewpoints from frontlines of breaking news. Our award-winning New Security Beat blog, run by our Environmental Change and Security Program, delves into environmental security, health, population and livelihood challenges in Africa, Asia and Latin American, and often features experts and journalists from around the world. These are only some examples of how the Wilson Center is really a global forum, which is one of the reasons I find working here so exciting.