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The McBeaths began their study of China's environmental issues and problems in 2004 when Jenifer was a Science Fellow at the American Embassy in Beijing, and Jerry was Fulbright Professor at the China Foreign Affairs University (also in Beijing). Work on this book commenced in 2008 when Jerry became an Exchange Professor of International Politics at China's University of International Business & Economics. Shortly thereafter, Jenifer became a Visiting Professor of Plant Pathology at the China Agricultural University. Up to 2013, they visited China several times a year.

In the course of research, the McBeaths interviewed more than one hundred individuals, including natural scientists, social scientists, humanists, college professors, staff and students, school teachers and principals, journalists and other media figures, environmental and other NGO representatives, government officials (national, provincial and local), business corporation executives and farmers. Most of those they interviewed requested anonymity, and we have acknowledged in footnotes only those who allowed us to do so.

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Note on Names

We use pinyin throughout, except for commonly recognized names, such as the Yangtze River. We introduce Chinese surnames first in the text, for example Hu Jintao; in the endnotes, Chinese surnames, like those in other languages, are listed last, as in Jintao Hu.