

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: FOREIGN TO CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The looming environmental crisis in China not only brings obstacles and pain to society, but also creates a great opportunity for international cooperation. This paper critically assesses the pitfalls of China's current environmental protection regime and the difficulties that Chinese environmental NGOs are facing. It argues that social media web sites and international environmental NGOs are able to help Chinese environmental NGOs confront their problems through tactics such as public diplomacy.

BACKGROUND

It is no secret that China is facing a mounting environmental crisis. Despite enjoying economic benefits from its pro-GDP policies, the central government of China is trying to use its political power to fight against China's daunting environmental issues.

In the 1970s, environmental issues drew public attention as a result of China's coal combustion activities.¹ Since then, due to the nation's rapid economic growth at 8 percent per year, a pressing need to alleviate the impact of environmental degradation has emerged. Various emission sources, including those from automobiles, have transformed China into one of the largest polluters by emitting significant amounts of SO₂ and CO₂ gases.² Besides air pollution, other problems plaguing China include water shortages, pollution, excess solid waste, over-farmed land, soil erosion, threatened biodiversity, and extreme weather related to climate change.³

The difficulties Beijing is facing go beyond the environment itself. As urban citizens are more likely to be exposed directly to environmental hazards, their health conditions are increasingly threatened by China's declining environmental status.⁴ For instance, in terms of productive health, the spread of environmental endocrine

1 National Research Council, *Energy Future and Urban Air Pollution: Challenges for China and Unites States* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008), 61.

2 Ibid, 233.

3 Gang Chen, *Politics of China's Environmental Protection: Problems and Progress* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2009), 1-13.

4 Mun S. Ho and Chris P. Nielsem, "Air Pollution and Health Damages in China: An Introduction and Review," in *Clearing the Air: The Health and economic Damages of Air Pollution in China*, eds. Mun S. Ho and Chris P. Nielsem (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

disruptors, such as toxic pesticides and phthalates, poses a risk to the nation's fertility rate.⁵ Recent research on China's environmental health issues indicates that urban environmental hazards are even negatively affecting citizens' mental health.⁶ The relationship between environmental degradation and deteriorating health conditions is established and indisputable.

While China's environmental crisis is becoming a major concern for the public, it is also becoming a burden to the economy itself. Recent research on the effects of air quality on China's economy shows that the increase of Particulate Matter (PM) concentrations has caused \$16 billion to \$69 billion in consumption loss and \$12 billion to \$22 billion in loss associated to social welfare in China's economy.⁷ The state-run think tank Chinese Academy for Environmental Planning (CAEP) also reported shocking numbers in this regard. About 1,275 billion Yuan (around \$208 billion), about 4 percent of China's GDP in 2008, was lost to the consequences of the ecological damage and environmental degradation; problems that are "likely to increase in the future."⁸

The Chinese public has become more actively involved in protests, especially in urban areas, due to the exposure to environmental pollution and the resulting health issues. The "mass incidents," a term used by Chinese officials to describe these demonstrations, highlight public concern about environmentally unfriendly industrial projects. The increasing tension between the public and the authorities over environmental issues has motivated Beijing to prioritize the environmental crisis. The government has recognized this issue and its potential to cast instability into society and eventually threaten the Communist Party's political legitimacy.⁹

For example, in 2008, China promoted the former State Environmental Protection Administration to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), a cabinet-level department under the State Council of People's Republic of China. The department is commissioned to protect the nation's air, water, and land quality while drafting environment-related regulations. It also has scientific research teams reporting on China's pollution status daily. The MEP possesses a political presence in all of China's governmental levels: central, provincial, municipal, county, and township. Regulatory tools such as the Three Synchronizations (3Ss),¹⁰ environmental impact assessments (EIA), and pollution discharge fees serve as major MEP political methods to confine pollution and to increase environmental performance in mainland China.

DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES

However, the MEP system cannot sufficiently operate on its own. Except for its headquarters in Beijing, whose budget is directly approved and provided by the State Council, each MEP sub-branch receives funding from its respective level of government. The superior MEP offices are capable of only providing guidance and policy advice to the derivative branches. For instance, the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau will not receive financial support from MEP even if its workplace is located in China's capital city. In addition to providing yearly budgets, the local governments have political authority to appoint and dismiss officials, and determine the resource distribution to local environmental protection bureaus, including "cars, office buildings, and employee housing."¹¹ Thus, many local MEPs lose their independence to counter environmentally unfriendly projects since local governments have tight control over their operational budgets.

The political structure is not favorable to protecting China's environment and the existing policies have pitfalls in stopping pollution as well. In many cases, the Pollution Discharge Fee, which is supposed to penalize those who excessively emit pollutants, is far below the actual cost of upgrading and operating pollutant treatment facilities. Thus, polluters would rather pay the fee as opposed to updating their facilities. Particularly, given that the fee

2007), 4-5.

5 Damjan Balabanič, Marjan Rupnik, and Aleksandra Krivograd Klemenčič, "Negative Impact of Endocrine-Disrupting Compounds on Human Reproductive Health," *Reproductive, Fertility and Development* 23, no. 3 (2011): 403-406.

6 Chen Shuo, Juan Chen and Pierre F. Landry, "Migration, Environmental Hazards, and Health Outcomes in China," *Social Science and Medicine* 80 (2012): 86-87.

7 Kira Matus et al., "Health Damages from Air Pollution in China," *Global Environmental Change* 22 (2012): 61-64.

8 Guizhen He et al, "Changes and Challenges: China's Environmental Management in transition", *Environmental Development* 3 (2012): 28.

9 Ibid.

10 The Three Synchronizations: the design, construction, and operation of a factory should be synchronized with the correspondent waste treatment facilities.

11 Chen, "Migration, Environmental Hazards," 73.

will only be charged to polluting enterprises every few months, it effectively legalizes the unlawful act of emitting pollutants, since once the fine is collected, factories fear no more repercussions to discharge pollutants until the next fine. Moreover, the local environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) have shown evidence of preferring the polluting enterprises to pay the discharge fee instead of curbing their pollution. Currently, 80 percent of the collected fines go to pollution-reduction projects while the other 20 percent directly finances operations of local EPBs. In other words, the more pollution produced by local factories, the higher income the EPBs receive.

As a result of China's growing environmental problems, environmental NGOs (ENGOs) have emerged to confront a great variety of environment related issues in China. However, unlike the government's strong position in the environmental protection arena due to its possession of political and economic resources, Chinese environmentalists or ENGOs usually find themselves at a disadvantage for the limited space they are allowed to conduct their work.

One of the major issues for ENGOs is their poor access to information. Detailed pollution data on the actual conditions remain secret and are governed by provincial and local authorities. ENGOs lack political support to collect relevant data by themselves due to the common noncooperative attitudes among both government institutions and local enterprises.¹²

The second major challenge is the legal status of ENGOs. According to the governmental regulations on registration and social organizations (revised in 1998), NGOs are required to register at the Bureau for Administration of NGOs, a subordinate institute of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, to ask for sponsorship. Absence of registered status and sponsorship limits NGOs' access to funding, political and legal assistance, and communications with the government.¹³ Risking this type of political isolation could eventually slow down an NGO's ongoing projects due to the lack of political support and in some circumstances may even bring risks to the existence of the NGO.

The third issue concerns the constraints on the ENGOs' financial and human resources.¹⁴ Having been troubled by insufficient funds from domestic sources, especially the government, the ENGOs have long been compelled to rely heavily on international sources, such as international environmental foundations, foreign governmental institutions, or multinationals. In response to the urgent need for funding among Chinese ENGOs and grassroots organizations, foreign environmental forces have become involved in China's environmental protection campaign.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

International Cooperation

At the national level, the Japanese government has been formally providing financial support to the Chinese government for its environmental projects since the 1990s with the watershed establishment of the Japan-China Friendship Environmental Protection Center in Beijing.¹⁵ International organizations, including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank, offer assistance in human capacity development and the construction of environmental infrastructures.¹⁶ Among these organizations is an increasing presence of the United States. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, has initiated several programs in China dealing with energy, climate, water, and environmental law. It not only cooperates with its government counterparts in China, such as the MEP and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), but it is also involved in public education that could potentially make lifestyle and energy-consumption patterns more ecologically friendly for the general Chinese public.

In the nongovernmental field, in terms of staff numbers, project scale, and funding, the presence of international NGOs in China began to surge in the mid-1990s.¹⁷ The increased financial support from international NGOs

12 Jonanthan Schwartz, "Environmental NGOs in China: Roles and Limits," *Pacific Affairs* 77, no.1 (2004): 36-42.

13 Schwartz, "Environmental NGOs in China," 36-42.

14 Xin Zhang and Richard Baum, "Civil Society and the Anatomy of a rural NGO," *The China Journal*, no. 52 (2004): 104.

15 Katherine Morton, *International Aid and China's Environment: Taming the Yellow Dragon* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 51-157.

16 Morton, *International Aid*, 51-157.

17 Jie Chen, "Transnational Environmental Movement: Impacts on the Green Civil Society in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 505

has eased the concerns that Chinese NGOs have over their budgetary difficulties. This is especially true for the ENGOS located in major cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. According to Tang and Zhan, 70 percent of Beijing's ENGOS in their interviews have reported that they receive their funding from international NGOs.¹⁸ Friends of Nature, the first and perhaps one of the most prestigious ENGOS in China, claims over 50 percent of its revenue is acquired through international channels.¹⁹

Besides providing funding, some international NGOs, particularly from the U.S., have started to cooperate with the Chinese government. For instance, one of the major ENGOS in the U.S., the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), has established permanent offices in Beijing and Shanghai to facilitate the operations of its Chinese programs. By partnering with organizations like the MEP, the China Electricity Council, and provincial governments in China, EDF develops projects dealing with coal combustion reduction, agriculture emission reduction, sulfur dioxide emission control, and trading.

Social Media

Besides talking to foreign benefactors, many of the Chinese environmentalists and ENGOS also resort to social media use on the Internet, especially Sina Weibo, in order to reach out to more audiences and to pursue their environmental agendas. Compared with the traditional methods of distributing environment-related knowledge, such as printing brochures or holding public presentations, the Internet possesses advantages in the cost-benefit analysis of educating the public. It also enables environmentalists or ENGOS to distribute information to a large number of audiences by setting up free subscriptions to microblogs. More importantly, the low cost of sending out messages online increases the visibility of small and newly established ENGOS. The Internet offers a more efficient alternative than traditional paper-based or face-to-face communication methods that these smaller, more specific ENGOS cannot afford.

In addition, the Internet helps to form a network among Chinese environmentalists and ENGOS themselves. When breaking news occurs, e.g. a sudden shutdown of one environmentalist Weibo account, the rest of the community is likely to be informed through their Weibo network quickly. From this perspective, the virtual connections on Weibo reinforce the real relationship among China's environmental protection participants. Since public diplomacy heavily depends on the exchange of words and information, the rise of microblogging in China helps to break the media control away from the central government as Internet users spontaneously create information.

Consequently, China's environmental movement online resembles a great platform for public diplomacy. The majority of the international NGOs who see China as their key area of focus, including Natural Resources Defense Council, the Nature Conservancy, and Greenpeace, have established their official accounts on microblogging web sites such as Weibo. Many of them even treat social media platforms as their major method for communicating with the public. Though domestic NGOs and Chinese environmentalists have larger subscriber counts currently, international NGOs are rapidly gaining audiences with loyal subscribers. International NGOs offer international perspectives on the information released, especially the standpoint of their host nations. Some Internet users are attracted to international NGOs because they provide information on the practices of foreign nations that could possibly be applied to China's environmental protection regime.

However, non-Chinese pro-environmental forces are not always welcomed in China. For instance, during the severe outbreak of haze pollution in eastern and central China in January 2013, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and the consulates in Guangzhou and Shanghai released their own PM 2.5 air quality index without permission from a Chinese authority. This move was heavily condemned by the Chinese government, despite its own index having failed to capture the severity of the troublesome air quality in China. The contrast between the Chinese official index and the one generated by the U.S. created massive dissatisfaction among the Chinese public, as people blamed the government's incompetency of managing and monitoring China's air quality. This move also evoked a heated debate on the Internet about whether foreign entities have the right to conduct their work

18 Shui-Yan Tang and Xueyong Zhan, "Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and Democratization in China," *Journal of Development Studies* 44, No. 3 (2006): 431.

19 Guobin Yang, "Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China," *The China Quarterly* 181, (2005): 41.

without complying with Chinese legal and political systems. The long-lasting online conversation over this matter formed sharply contrasting views toward the U.S.: A country helping to protect Chinese people's right to health by exposing the true condition of China's air quality, or a troublemaker who seeks nothing but chaos and disorder within China by undermining their national trust in the Chinese government.²⁰

SUMMARY

Environmental topics are undoubtedly a crucial concern for China. Decades of high-speed development have exposed a large number of environmental problems to Chinese society. Together with the booming social media industry and an increasing awareness of the environment, China is welcoming public diplomacy through its environmental movements online.

Despite no direct evidence, there is a coherent theoretical framework behind foreign investments in Chinese ENGOs and the cooperation between the Chinese government and international environmental organizations. Interestingly, among all the social issues, the environment is perhaps one of the fields that the Chinese government holds the least conservative attitude toward with regard to foreign influences. This opens vast opportunities for international cooperation with foreign environmental forces, some of which are welcomed to set up bases in China. Among them, international ENGOs are particularly likely to be accepted and recognized by the Chinese public due to their nongovernmental background, as well as their devotion and dedication to environmental issues. It is encouraging that non-Chinese ENGOs are actively taking advantage of China's new social dynamics, such as microblogging, to educate the Chinese public and form a new relationship with China's public sphere. This newly formed cooperation between China and international ENGOs may be a sign and gateway for greater opportunities and future public diplomacy in China.

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²⁰ Chen, "The Conspiracy Behind the PM 2.5 Data Released by U.S. Embassy and Consulates in China," <http://blog.huanqiu.com/135502/2012-06-07/2531275/> (accessed August 20, 2013).

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