Toward an Interwoven Community of Practice:
How Do NGOs Work With Chinese Journalists on Reporting Climate Change?

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Since climate governance gained political traction in China, NGOs have emerged as an active stakeholder. Media work, one of NGOs' main activities with significant implications for Chinese climate journalism, remains underexplored. This study fills this lacuna by examining how NGOs interact with Chinese journalists and discussing how their interactions affect their mutual relations and climate reporting. A group of Chinese climate NGO professionals and journalists were followed over a period of two years (COP21–COP23) on WeChat. Drawing on the concept of community of practice, group chats are analyzed in terms of members' expertise construction and interpersonal networking. Through online observation, supplemented by fieldwork at COP21 and COP23 and interviews of key members during COP25, this study argues that when analyzing Chinese climate NGO–journalist relations, it is necessary to take into account interpersonal ties and climate expertise, two shaping factors for a potential interwoven community among the two actors.

Keywords: China, climate change, NGO, journalist, community of practice

Given extensive research on media representation of climate change from the early 1990s (Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014), scholars point out that these studies "only tell us one part of the story" (Anderson, 2015, p. 381) and there is a need for systematic analysis of the media strategies of news sources such as scientists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and policy makers. This study responds to this call by focusing on NGOs dealing with climate change in China and examining their interactions with journalists.

Scholars have noticed the trend that NGOs participate in news production, as news organizations face shrinking financial and technological resources for sustaining original reporting. By contrast, NGOs have become more institutionalized, professionalized, and competitive in producing information (Powers, 2018). Journalists' increased dependence on NGOs raises concerns about the blurring line between NGOs and news organizations (Wright, 2019). This issue is especially relevant to climate change reporting. NGOs have been

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one key stakeholder in the field of climate change. Global climate governance has lent legitimacy to NGOs as news sources. They are acknowledged by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2017) to bring "vital experience, expertise, information and perspectives from civil society" (p. 3) into the climate solution. Literature suggests that NGOs play a distinguished role for climate journalism in speaking for public good, providing specialized information and expert assessment other than that from government and industry (Lück, Wozniak, & Wessler, 2016; Russell, 2013). Meanwhile, NGOs' media strategy and relations with journalists are contingent on political, social, and cultural contexts (Konishi, 2018; Wright, 2019).

This study focuses on China, firstly because of its role in global climate governance. The rise of emerging economies since the beginning of this century has been reshaping the landscape of global governance (Nayyar, 2016). China, a leading rising power as well as the world's top carbon emitter, has been deeply involved in global climate governance. It is not only playing a crucial role in the emissions mitigations but also striving to be one of the norm makers of climate governance (Belis, Joffe, Kerremans, & Qi, 2015; Engels, 2018). Yet the existing media studies on climate change are predominantly situated in developed Western countries (Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014). The exploration of climate communication in China will expand the scope of literature and provide media perspectives on the country's climate endeavors.

Furthermore, China offers an intriguing sociopolitical context for studying NGOs' media work. In general, NGOs have developed with political and resource constraints in China. During the current Xi Jinping's administration, which is characterized by a centralization of power in varied policy areas, the civil sector faces even tighter controls (Kostka & Zhang, 2018). Although Chinese authoritarian regime seemingly allows consistent and unequivocal top-down implementation of policies, scholars see climate change as an "open, complex and imperfectly understood" (Geall, 2018, p. 542) problem, which is difficult to resolve by top-down approaches and essentially requires active civic engagement (Engels, 2018). Recent policy changes indeed render space for NGOs to negotiate both constraints and opportunities. In 2014, China's revised Environmental Protection Law implemented a chapter on "information disclosure and public participation" (Xinhua, 2014). As environmental protection becomes a new political priority (Kostka & Zhang, 2018), NGOs are expected to serve for environmental governance, contributing to China's "construction of ecological civilization and green development" (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China, 2017, para. 1).

Seeking opportunities, many NGOs working on climate change see media and information sharing campaigns as the best way to realize organizational purposes and participate in Chinese climate politics (Schroeder, 2008). The advance of the Internet and social media adds space for operation against the state's monitor. NGOs experiment with various online activities, for instance, carrying out online campaigns, networking with organizations, and engaging audiences (J. Liu & Goodnight, 2016). Particularly, we have observed NGOs actively using social media to network and work with Chinese journalists.

The present study takes an online chat group as a case, which consisted of major NGO professionals and journalists working on climate change in China. It contributes to the study of NGO–journalist relations by firstly introducing community of practice theory which provides a useful theoretical framework to understand NGO–journalist interactions. An extensive online ethnography was subsequently conducted,

supplemented by on-site fieldwork and interviews. These empirical efforts delineate the Chinese ecology of climate NGOs and journalists and unveil their dynamic interactions in a special sociopolitical context. In the end, implications for Chinese climate reporting are discussed.

Community of Practice

To analyze Chinese climate NGOs working with journalists, this study uses the concept of community of practice as the theoretical framework. The concept originated from social learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and has been widely used in various fields, including education (Patton & Parker, 2017), business, and health care (Li et al., 2009), across academia and industries. The concept essentially theorizes how people form an identity characterized by a shared body of knowledge through social interactions (Agrifoglio, 2015). It is defined as a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The shared knowledge and expertise constitute the competence of the community (Wenger, 2010, p. 180). It includes not only concrete knowledge like concepts, tools, and skills, but also tacit knowledge such as rules of thumb, cultural values, and worldviews (Hara, 2009; Sole & Edmondson, 2002).

A community's competence demarcates the community's boundary: whether sharing the competence or not distinguishes members of a community from outsiders (Wenger, 2010). Boundaries are not always explicit, but they are concrete: A layperson sitting beside a group of specialists would clearly feel its presence. Newcomers can acquire the identity of a community of practice by learning from the periphery and move to the center as becoming more competent (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A community of practice is dynamic. Newcomers can also contribute to the competence of the community by bringing in new knowledge so that they pull the boundary along toward their direction (Wenger, 2010). As such, whose knowledge is considered legitimate or who is able to change the criteria for competence conjures up the issue of power (Contu, 2014; Wenger, 2010). Both vertical power, associated with traditional hierarchies, and horizontal power, derived from peer recognition, exert influences. They function in tension in a community of practice, when it comes to judging who defines the competence (Wenger, 2010).

Community of practice theory adds a relevant perspective to the understanding of boundaries of journalism. Scholars such as Meltzer and Martik (2017) and Hutchins and Boyle (2017) put the concept against Zelizer's (1993) "interpretive community," holding that the profession of journalism is not merely defined by a shared understanding of news events, but also by a series of practices: the specialist journalistic training, accumulated experience, and cultivation of reliable sources (p. 219). This view resonates with the perspective of Carlson and Lewis (2015), who adopt a constructivist view on boundaries of journalism and call attention to "practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization" (p. 2). From these perspectives, when talking about the blurring line between NGOs and news organizations, the mere focus on interpretative control of news events is not enough. Scholars have started to pay attention to complex and heterogeneous ways of coalitions between NGO and journalists. For instance, NGOs have been recruiting experienced journalists, which affects NGOs' organizational culture and working practices (Wright, 2019).

Climate NGOs in China

NGOs dealing with climate change in China emerged around 2007 (L. Liu, Wang, & Wu, 2017). For convenience, this study refers to them as "climate NGOs." On the basis of their founders, these NGOs can be classified into two categories: international NGOs (INGOs) and Chinese domestic ones. INGOs include international NGOs' Chinese branches (e.g., Greenpeace) and those founded by international foundations (e.g., iGDP founded by Energy Foundation). Chinese domestic NGOs working on climate change are mostly grassroots NGOs (e.g., Friend of Nature), against another major type of domestic NGOs—namely, governmental NGOs that are operated by governments.

In general, the extent to which NGOs influence China's climate governance remains modest (Huang, 2016; Lo, 2010). Most domestic NGOs do not work on climate change full time (Lo, 2010). Still growing, they largely lack the required expertise to deal with the complex climate issue, especially weak in participating in global climate negotiations (Schroeder, 2008; Wang, 2018). According to L. Liu and colleagues (2017), there are only a handful of domestic NGOs capable of following climate negotiations. Comparatively, INGOs have more advantages in terms of funding, information, and professional capacities (Schroeder, 2008). While enjoying resources of legitimacy from the United Nations (UN) and having considerable impacts on global climate governance (Wang, 2018), INGOs usually face more institutional restrictions due to their international background (Schroeder, 2008).

Climate NGOs tend to keep nonconfrontational and operate within a scope acceptable to Chinese government (Lo, 2010; Moriggi, 2016). Domestic ones work with the government and provide constructive suggestions to authorities (Huang, 2016). They contribute to implementation of climate policies by supervising local governments and mobilizing the public (L. Liu et al., 2017). To effectively operate, INGOs choose to give up their conventional shaming and pressuring tactics (Schroeder, 2008; Wang, 2018). Acting as a connector of the global and Chinese agenda of climate change, they monitor Chinese government's climate actions, contribute to policymaking, and investigate related industries (L. Liu et al., 2017). They also support Chinese domestic NGOs in building capacities regarding climate change (Huang, 2016; L. Liu et al., 2017).

Climate NGOs and Chinese Journalists

To deal with media, INGOs usually have media divisions that hire experienced journalists (Dai, Zeng, & Wang, 2017). Given that voicing critics and mobilizing the public are undesirable in China, INGOs employ adaptive media strategies (Brooks, 2012; Dai et al., 2017). According to Brooks (2012), the former media manager of Greenpeace China, one important strategy is designing information supply that meets the news agenda. Mobilizing personal connections is another one, for "Chinese people tend to rely on interpersonal relationships to get things done" (p. 23). Chinese domestic NGOs normally do not share the same level of investment in media work. Nevertheless, some of them gain media savvy from their founders or members who are environmental journalists (Dai et al., 2017). Taken together, in line with literature on Chinese environmental movements (Xie, 2009), personal networks seem to be one culturally significant resource for Chinese NGOs, including climate NGOs in this case, to work with Chinese media.

Although this study uses "climate journalists" to refer to the group of Chinese journalists who report climate-related topics, they usually do not work full time on climate change. In a survey of Chinese journalists who reported at the 2015 UN climate conference (The 21st Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, known as COP21), more than half of the surveyed journalists normally covered politics and current affairs, and more than half of them reported the climate conference for the first time (Pan, Opgenhaffen, & Van Gorp, 2020). For Chinese climate journalists, who generally lack climate-related education, NGOs are an indispensable information source (Geall, 2011; L. Liu et al., 2017). By interviewing Chinese journalists, Geall (2011) found that they largely consider NGOs helpful. They attend seminars and training sessions organized by NGOs. They perceive materials from NGOs as trustworthy and useful to shape their analyses. In news events such as the UN climate conferences (COPs), Chinese journalists, especially those who are newcomers to the field, acknowledge the support from NGOs (Geall, 2011).

Applying Community of Practice to Climate NGO–Journalist Interactions in China

From the above analysis, NGO professionals and journalists are connected through work practices, on occasions like the annual COPs where they work under the same roof. Social media, moreover, offer a virtual environment where the interactions transcend the limitation of space and time (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005). Drawing on the concept of community of practice, these practices can lead to such a community for Chinese climate NGO practitioners and journalists.

Our analyses sit on the assumptions of the concept. The first one is that the interactions between NGO professionals and journalists are seen as a "social learning process." We posit that insofar as Chinese journalists lack the capability to handle complex issues like the international climate negotiations (Geall, 2011), this provides NGOs with opportunities to influence journalists in respect of their climate knowledge. Such interactions with effects can take place in many ways, like through casual, informal talks, as suggested by the community of practice theory (Wenger, 2010). The second assumption is that the knowledge on climate change and associated boundaries are constructed through interactions. We define climate knowledge as "the situated understanding regarding how to solve recurrent questions about climate change." NGOs are not seen as climate experts by nature. On the contrary, they need to manage their advantages in climate knowledge so as to keep their expertise relevant and attractive to journalists. We thus define climate expertise of NGOs as "the advantages in climate knowledge in relation to journalists." Based on the two assumptions, we focus on climate knowledge and formulate the first research question:

RQ1:   What climate expertise do climate NGOs establish through interacting with Chinese journalists?

In theory, the stock of competence marks who are knowers or not, namely, the boundary. Claimers to the competence are community leaders who define the boundary. In this study, NGOs, especially INGOs, are likely to be the claimers to climate knowledge. However, boundaries are always under negotiation that involves practices of inclusion and exclusion. NGOs might be the initial leader, but their interactions with journalists can lead journalists to share a similar level of knowledge. NGOs need to, on the one hand, keep their knowledge open to journalists, and on the other hand, maintain their advantage to keep themselves relevant to journalists. We are interested in these potential boundaries and how NGOs manage them while working with journalists. Therefore, the second research question is as follows:

RQ2:   Are there any boundaries among climate NGOs and Chinese journalists, and if there are, how do NGOs negotiate the boundaries with journalists?

According to literature, interpersonal relationships are one asset that NGOs take advantage of when dealing with journalists. From the perspective of community of practice, interpersonal relationships derive from a shared learning history, the foundation for the forming of a shared identity. We are interested in not only the sources of these relationships but also in how NGOs incorporate them into their work. The research question for this is as follows:

RQ3:   How do climate NGOs work with Chinese journalists on an interpersonal basis?

Method

Description of the Case Study

To investigate the interactions of climate NGOs and journalists in China, we focused on one particular WeChat group. Launched in 2011, WeChat is currently the most prevailing social media platform in China, with 1.15 billion monthly active users worldwide (Tencent, 2019). Its messaging group is similar to a WhatsApp group, where participants can send messages in various forms, such as text, pictures, and links. During the Bonn climate meeting in October 2015, Greenpeace China's media manager initiated the online group named "Let Us Talk About Climate Policy and Communication (LUT)" for communicating with Chinese journalists. The group thrived during COP21 and has developed to a size of 118 participants at the time of writing.[1] There were (at least) 45 staff from 15 NGOs and 49 journalists from 25 media organizations. These NGOs nearly covered all the major NGOs working on climate change in China: 10 international and five domestic NGOs. Twenty-five media organizations consisted of 10 official media, 11 commercial media, and four overseas media.

As an early participant since COP21, the first author followed the group chat over two years (December 2015 to March 2018). The study was based on an inductive content analysis of the chat messages in the WeChat group. In addition, the first author conducted fieldwork and interviews to elaborate the story about how NGOs contribute to Chinese climate reporting. The merits of focusing on a WeChat group are first of all that we are able to analyze the daily interactions among real actors with little intervention. Secondly, we can avoid a "big stories" bias in research (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381). Instead of only relying on coherent, fully fledged narratives that are based on researcher-prompted, personal experience and past events, the value of those fragments of discussion usually filtered out is emphasized. Moreover, the ongoing group chat adds a diachronic dimension into the analysis. The research material gained by this long-term observation can illuminate the diachronically dynamic networking among participants.

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[1] The WeChat group keeps having participants join and leave during the observing period. There are 118 participants in the chat record, of which 101 participants stayed within the group to the end point.

Content Analysis

Empirical Data

Messages of the WeChat group LUT that were submitted between December 7, 2015, and March 26, 2018, constituted the major empirical data of this research. The start date was when an in-group journalist introduced the first author into this group, somewhere in the middle of COP21 (November 30, 2015–December 12, 2015) and extended across two successive climate change conferences—COP22 (November 7–18, 2016) and COP23 (November 6–17, 2017)—in the following two years. All the chat messages were manually downloaded, amounting to 1,972 messages. Figure 1 shows the daily number of messages within that time period. It can be observed that participants kept constant communication up until the last day of the study period. During COPs, participants talked more than on normal days, with several peaks of messages. Messages during the three COPs (not the complete duration of COP21) accounted for 35% of the total amount.
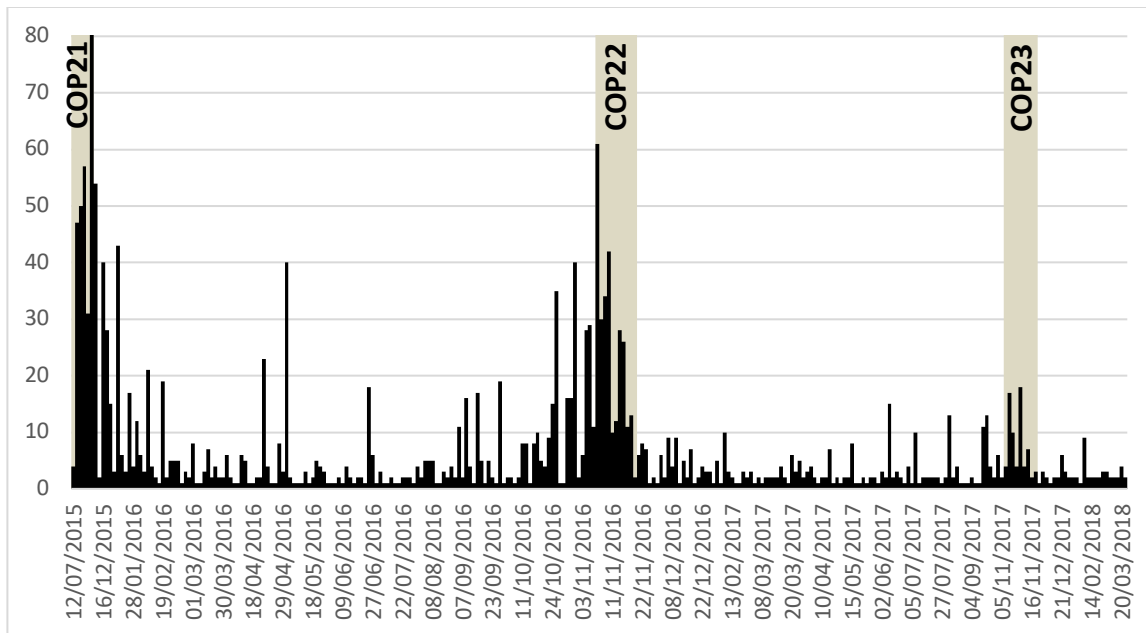

Figure 1. Daily number of messages in WeChat group "Let Us Talk About Climate Policy and Communication" (LUT).[2]

The informed consent procedure was approved by the social and societal ethics committee of the researchers' university. On entering the group in December 2015, the first author clarified her status as a PhD researcher and informed the group founder of her intention of doing research about the group. While

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[2] Note: The number of messages on December 12, 2015, is 161; the total number of messages during the whole time period is 1,972.

collecting the data, the researcher contacted all the group participants via WeChat, individually. Only the messages of participants who give explicit consent were used for content analysis. Eventually, 73.2% of the entire chat messages from 37 participants were retained for analysis, which means that those most engaged participants have been included in the study. To guarantee all participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were applied in all the group discussion examples cited in this study.

Besides the chat messages, additional supplementary data were collected. One important task to answer the research question regarding interpersonal ties was to investigate the group participants' work experience, to reconstruct the participants' off-line network. Current affiliation information was gathered from each participant's name. As required by a rule of this particular WeChat group, it was indicated in the form of "real name + affiliation." Participants' online information on their work experience were surveyed. By doing so, it was possible to add more information relevant to the participants' relationships.

An Inductive Analysis Approach

The first author, as a native Chinese, conducted the content analysis. To prepare for the coding process, all the messages were grouped into discussion sections. A new section was defined by an opening message with no reference to the previous discussion. A discussion section could have several connected topics or could be a single message without any response. Each message was coded to define its aim or function. Labels were inductively developed and intended to reflect various forms of practices, such as "promoting own organization's news release," "breaking news about negotiations," "asking for contacts," or "making fun." Additional labels identified the conversation initiators and to whom they were addressed.

Regarding climate knowledge, we looked into the ways of problem solving in the WeChat group. Attention was paid to conversations with regard to offering versus taking information or asking versus answering questions. For example, when an NGO practitioner told journalists, "Today, there will not be much negotiation progress, you could just write some profile stories," we identified NGOs using their knowledge on climate negotiations to inform journalists. NGOs posted lots of news releases, but in many cases, there was no response. We considered such releases not being taken as relevant knowledge. By identifying and classifying, we were able to come up with the types of climate knowledge that Chinese journalists were taking from NGOs.

Regarding the boundaries among group members, while carefully reading the conversations, we reflected on who were engaged in the conversation and who were not, and who were considered as "us" and "them." For example, when an NGO practitioner referred to her colleagues and herself who attended COPs many times as "old guys," she was distinguishing themselves from those fresh to the climate conference. Special attention was paid to conversations between NGOs and journalists to see how NGOs practitioners recognized journalists in respect of their climate knowledge.

To answer the third research question, messages that could reveal the common bases for interpersonal relationships were coded. The revealing messages included participants' self-introductions and relevant conversations—for instance, two participants who indicated that they were former colleagues. Based on the supplementary data about participants' work experience, we reconstructed a map of interpersonal ties among group participants. Subsequently, attempts were made to see how these relationships functioned. We

focused on the interactions between participants, and more specially, on how interpersonal relationships played a role in work activities. The specific practices identified during the preliminary coding were categorized into five major work activities that will be introduced in detail in the result section.

Fieldwork and Interview

Besides following the WeChat conversations, the first author attended COP21 in Paris and COP23 in Bonn. NGO professionals and journalists from China were observed and talked to on the conference site. The off-line fieldwork during COPs was highly valuable in fully comprehending the WeChat group conversations. A semistructured interview was then conducted during COP25, which was nearly two years after finishing the WeChat group observation, with a main purpose of verifying the findings based on the content analysis. Eight group members were interviewed: a freelance journalist with work experience at both state-run and commercial media; a freelance journalist who used to work as an NGO media manager; a journalist working for a state-run news agency; a former journalist who used to work at both state-run and commercial media; a director of a domestic NGO with media experience; a domestic NGO professional; a media manager of an INGO; and a media manager of a domestic NGO. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Results

Four Forms of Climate Expertise

By looking at messages in offering versus taking relations among group members, which was later confirmed by interviews, we recognized four types of climate expertise that NGOs were taking advantage of when working with journalists: seniority in COPs, professional information possession, social network, and media credibility.

The first form of expertise was "seniority" in climate negotiation—that is, the amount of experience a participant had with the UN climate conferences. Years of COP experience gave these participants an exclusive seniority. They were witnesses of history in journalistic terms. When fresh climate journalists asked questions like "How did you feel six years ago in Copenhagen?", veteran COP participants were the only ones who had a say.

The second form was possession of professional information, which included having access to professional materials, knowing the negotiation processes, being able to tell what is important about climate change, being able to break news, and the ability to quickly react to certain events. For example, during COP21, it was a Greenpeace practitioner who broke a scandal in the group about fossil fuel companies bribing academics at leading U.S. universities. A World Resources Institute (WRI) practitioner was the first to expose the news about the High Ambition Coalition during COP21 and indicate that the group was available for an interview.

Social network was the next form of expertise: contacts with climate experts, scientists, and UN officials in the field, access to negotiation delegates, and so on. Of course, this knowledge was not obtained by NGOs exclusively. For example, when the group was not sure about the Chinese translation of the Paris

Agreement, a journalist from an official news agency resolved the issue by contacting officials from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The last form of expertise was labeled "media credibility." Media also formed a source of recognition of NGOs' expertise. Being an interviewee, a guest author or an important news source were ways to claim the knowledge in dealing with the media. One NGO practitioner, promoting his writing for the *Financial Times* and his comments cited by *The Economist*, claimed an expertise endorsed by these prestigious media outlets.

Boundaries Under Negotiation

For the boundary's constructivist nature, it evolves over time as newcomers join in and bring with them new experiences. However, when we analyzed this WeChat group, it was found that the INGOs remained the major claimers, if not exclusive, to the expertise in climate change. They kept the boundary favorable to themselves. They were seldom challenged by domestic NGOs or journalists. Subsequently, we present three performances of boundary work by NGOs, either explicit or implicit: (1) the boundaries between the group and outsiders; (2) the ones among the group members; and (3) the occasions during which these boundaries were challenged.

Ad 1[3]

Although according to our interviews not every NGO practitioner admitted the existence of a Chinese "climate circle," such a symbolic circle existed in conversation when outsiders were distinguished from people following climate negotiations within the group. Example 1 is an illustration of this observation. In this conversation, three NGO practitioners and one journalist seemed to agree that "climate circle" members should have sufficient knowledge of climate negotiations. In their view, the climate science researcher was not qualified to write about climate negotiations because of her limited knowledge stock of the Kyoto Protocol. Therefore, although the researcher was going to share the same floor with NGOs in an event, she was not accepted as a "climate circle" member.

> Example 1: [When one NGO practitioner announced a coming event and mentioned one of the speakers, D.]
> S-NGO4: Is D. also in the climate circle?
> M-NGO1: She is from the Institute of Atmospheric Physics. Some researchers there also work on climate negotiations and climate change @ S-NGO4.
> M-NGO1: [link:] Climate negotiations for 23 years
> S-NGO4: Wow!
> M-NGO1: This article is written by her.
> S-NGO4: Brilliant.
> M-NGO1: Yeah, yeah.
> R-NGO5: Although the article looks nice, it makes lots of mistakes.

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[3] "*Ad*" is Latin, which means with regard to/considering. "*Ad 1.*" means "with regard to Point 1."

> R-NGO5: Besides minor mistakes like "the Kyoto Protocol being adopted in Tokyo," its interpretation of the Paris Agreement is quite misleading.
> R-NGO5: Reading the article, one would conclude that the reduction of countries' emissions is stipulated in the Paris Agreement. It is totally not the case.
> J-Media4: It's a pity the most widespread articles about the U.S.' withdrawal are not written by people who closely follow the negotiations.

Ad 2

Boundaries also existed among group participants. Such a boundary did not cut between NGOs and journalists, but between the experienced and inexperienced. When the Paris Agreement was adopted, INGO practitioners who had followed COPs for years shared their excitement in the group with emoji like hugs and cries, whereas few journalists or domestic NGO practitioners had similar experiences. They showed little emotional resonance. Consequently, the experience of climate negotiations distinguished those who were more experienced in the field of climate change from others.

Ad 3

NGOs were not exclusive claimers of the expertise in the group. Veteran journalists who had reported UN climate negotiations for years also had competitive expertise. They could also answer questions about climate change or introduce climate negotiations. For example, one veteran journalist was invited by a domestic NGO to introduce climate negotiations during COP22. In some cases, journalists had even more resources than NGOs, such as in the aforementioned case in which a state media journalist had advantageous access to governmental officials. In this respect, NGO practitioners did not have consistent attitudes. Some welcomed, while some showed a more defensive position. In one case, when a journalist asked for an explanation of why Germany was given the Fossil of the Day award, a veteran journalist offered an answer but was immediately corrected by an INGO practitioner, who added a more thorough answer. By doing this, the INGO reclaimed the expertise.

Some internal tensions were also associated with the boundary work of NGOs. As the group founder, the Greenpeace media manager required that the group discussions should be "relevant" to climate change. When participants started an "irrelevant" topic, she would call a stop to it. An explicit intervention was raised by a researcher from a government-sponsored think tank, who asked for details about arrangements of the COP conference site. The researcher received a serious critique from the group founder:

> Is it your first time attending COP? Lots of information can be easily found on the UN website. Everyone is busy in the morning and has to get up early at 5 a.m. Focus must be put on their own job, not on providing trivial information. Please cherish the time of others. (The group founder of LUT)

In this case, the researcher was criticized for being unprofessional and wasting others' time. Even though these interventions were made as individual submissions from the media manager, we saw the other participants acquiescing to them. This case represented the tension between "competence" and "experience"

(Wenger, 2010). Seemingly irrelevant or trivial questions could possibly have brought new experiences to this group, but were rejected. It seemed that the majority of NGOs and journalists confined the group boundary to the scope of established group "competence." Participants supporting the interventions formed a horizontal power, which acted as a catalyst for the integrity of the group and, at the same time, as the means of protecting their territory.

Interpersonal Relationships as a Resource

Multiple Types of Interpersonal Relationships

There were four recognizable types of interpersonal relationships among the group participants. The first type consisted of current and former colleague relationships. For example, one Greenpeace practitioner and one UN practitioner were former colleagues, as they both once worked for WWF. The second type was formed by transorganizational or transinstitutional relationships. For instance, one domestic NGO practitioner, who used to work for an INGO, had a transorganizational relationship, and one NGO practitioner had a relationship across institutions as a result of being a former environmental journalist. Senior versus junior colleague relationships formed the third type. For example, a former senior journalist remained a supervisor to a young journalist. The last type of interpersonal relationship resulted from those with similar work experience. In this group, experience of attending the annual COPs was a valuable resource, as analyzed in the expertise section. Many conversations recalled this experience where participants recognized each other as "companions," suggesting the experience created a collective memory shared by participants who formed a corresponding identity.

Several points about the analyzed interpersonal relationships should be made. First of all, interpersonal relationships as a resource was usually an individual accumulation. A person's network can be decoupled from affiliations. Also, a person could have multiple layers of interpersonal relationships with different people all at once so that he or she could flexibly make use of. Further and again, INGOs, such as Greenpeace, WWF, and Oxfam, were more advantageous than their domestic peers in interpersonal relationships. It appeared that practitioners from INGOs usually had richer work experience and wider personal network. In the end, the interpersonal relationships in the WeChat group were not static. During the observing period interpersonal links among participants kept being produced and renewed.

Personalized Work Interactions

Interpersonal relationships were infused into all kinds of the observed NGO–journalist interactions. Work practices were personalized. Being personal, specifically reflected in the conversations, was being intimate, reciprocal, and lasting. Next, we illustrate how NGOs brought interpersonal relations into their five major work activities: (1) expanding networks; (2) promoting news releases; (3) providing advanced notice of upcoming news events; (4) job discussions; and (5) network fostering.

Ad 1

When a newcomer joined the group, WeChat's functionality allowed participants to see who the inviter was. While an inviter's interpersonal relationships could be passed to a newcomer, a personal welcome, as an expression of their relationship, helped the newcomer be more easily accepted.

Ad 2

One of the important jobs for NGOs was providing information tailored to journalists' needs. To make their promotional messages more appealing, NGOs would pack the promotion as they would offer a gift to friends. Moreover, if a promotion happened with an established off-line relationship involved, it was more likely to get a positive reply from journalists. In Example 2, the analyst used to be a senior climate reporter working for the same medium as the replying junior journalist. Their conversation showed a blend of the off-line former colleague and PR-journalist relationship:

> Example 2: [When a business analyst, who was a former journalist, promoted a news release]
> F-Media2: Oops, did not meet today's report deadline. [Grimace][Grimace]
> L-Corporate1: Ha-ha, no worries dear, @ F-Media 2.
> L-Corporate1: It is just for sharing.
> F-Media2: I'll write next time. [laugh]
> L-Corporate1: [Rose][Rose]

Ad 3

Another major work for NGOs was notifying journalists in advance of news events or interview opportunities so that NGOs could obtain media visibility. Similar to promoting a news release, a conversation in a more personal way could be favorable to NGOs. In Example 3, the journalist made fun of Greenpeace, calling it as "an anonymous organization," a common way of referring to a sensitive news source in a Chinese context. This did not offend the Greenpeace practitioner, but instead somehow facilitated a close conversation:

> Example 3: [Greenpeace notified journalists of a news event]
> M-Greenpeace: We have sued the Norwegian government for mining oil in the Arctic for an
> extended period. The judgement will be pronounced next month. Is anybody interested?
> M-Greenpeace: The Hague International Court will pronounce in the second week of COP23.
> Z-Media3: When you win, I will write.
> Z-Media3: An anonymous organization.
> M-Greenpeace: Thank you!!!@ Z-Media3

Ad 4

Job discussions refer to participants communicating about their jobs—for instance, updating information about climate negotiations, or discussing climate-related research. It was also one of the major in-group interactions, especially during COPs when NGOs and journalists were situated in the same camp

and following the same news event. Personal expressions—making jokes, self-mocking, making emotional comments—contributed to engaging talks, as Example 4 showed:

> Example 4: [When participants talked about the conference translation during COP21]
> E-NGO2: Did not know there is Chinese translation, stupid of me.
> I-NGO1: Channel 6, please . . .
> H-Media3: Me neither . . .
> I-NGO1: Feels like the UN translation service was not used to the extent as expected.

Ad 5

Many group activities—for instance, New Year's greetings, making thankful notes, and claiming the group rule—just aimed at fostering this network. In these interactions, we recognized an important role of Chinese culture. It was typically reflected in handing out "Red Packet Money" in the group. Giving red packets with a small amount of cash during the Lunar New Year to send good wishes is a Chinese tradition—a typical way of fostering interpersonal relationships. Since WeChat developed this function linked with a user's bank card, it has been widely used. In this group, NGOs sent digital red packets for New Year greetings. Newly joined journalists sent red packets to express their appreciation. Many of these interactions carried a job-related purpose, but were performed in personalized ways.

Implications for Chinese Climate Reporting

Climate Change Reported Mainly as a Governance Issue

Regarding the shared knowledge, the observed WeChat group had similar elements as an "epistemic community," as Gough and Shackley (2001) used it to describe a coalition of policy actors who agreed on anthropogenic climate change being a significant risk to manage (p. 329). The scientific consensus was the default knowledge for most of the discussions in the WeChat group. NGOs were transferring their ways of framing problems—its causes, severity and possible solutions—to Chinese journalists. This in part accounts for the absence of climate skepticism in China, in addition to Dembicki's (2017) conclusion that news media need to follow the governmental tone.

It is also suggested that climate expertise of NGOs was largely policy oriented about climate governance where policy makers were key actors. The distribution of the group messages also showed that the group's most active periods were during COPs. This implies that climate change presents in Chinese news media foremostly as a global governance issue, rather than a public-relevant environmental issue. NGOs, especially big international ones, give their priority to targeting at the government and industry, given the fact that the public advocacy in China is full of restraints (L. Liu et al., 2017).

Disparate Agenda Setting of State-Run and Commercial Media

We found that boundaries did exist among participants, giving shape to a so-called climate circle. The core of the circle was composed of those who had followed climate change and the negotiations closely:

INGO professionals and a few journalists mostly from commercial media or working as freelancers. On the whole, INGOs led such a circle. The existence of boundaries indicated that, on the NGO part, INGOs play better the role of climate expert than domestic ones and thus have more chance to exert influence on journalists with their information supply.

More importantly, different levels of involvement of Chinese journalists, suggested by our fieldwork and interviews, largely came down to disparate agenda setting of state-run and commercial media on the climate issue. Journalists from state-run media were essentially the extension of the Chinese delegation. They carried a mission of disseminating and promoting the Chinese government's climate policy and efforts. Officials were deemed as the most authoritative news source. According to a media manager, INGOs were only consulted for background information, and quite often organizations' names were not exposed even if information was adopted, as their international status rendered political sensibility. In cases where journalists cited NGOs, they mainly did this for diversifying sources or leveraging NGOs' credibility to endorse a settled tone.

Journalists from commercial media and freelancers usually reported topics related to climate change regularly, such as energy and environment. Without the state promotion being the primary obligation, they valued climate change out of professional judgement and commercial ends—for instance, a high page view. As told by interviewees, journalists from commercial media were more likely to cover the scientific aspect of climate change, focus on the tensions of negotiations, and write about the impacts of climate change on society. A couple of journalists joined global alliances for environmental journalists, keeping pace with the global agenda. Overall, journalists working at commercial outlets or as freelancers tend to share similar value judgement and knowledge with NGOs. When communicating with NGOs, they "felt comfortable," as an interviewee put it.

Interpersonal Relationships: Imperfect Lubricant

In the end, we identified four types of interpersonal relationships and noticed that with the help of relationships such as former colleagueship, work activities were personalized. It became difficult to differentiate NGO–journalist interactions on and off work.

On the NGOs' side, interpersonal relationships were a handy resource. In general, they helped NGOs to maintain and explore professional connections. For example, to make new contacts, an interviewed INGO media manager would ask for help from her journalism school classmates who were journalists. Yet the relationships built on the individual level were unstable on the organizational level. As a media manager said, the removal of a friend-like editor would easily cause a breakdown of cooperation. It is imaginable that the same case may happen when there are personnel changes at NGOs.

On the journalists' side, the interviewed journalists suggested that interpersonal relationships act as "lubricant" for work. A typical example for this was an interviewed freelancer who stayed close to a few NGO professionals to the extent that they had become friends. Casual talks or even gossiping like friends gave her useful information for work—for instance, regarding the working style of an NGO. As such, this kind of private, informal, interpersonal relationships made her work "smoother." However, when it comes

to reporting, all the interviewed journalists claimed that interpersonal relationships were unlikely to influence their professional judgements. An interviewed media manager concluded that NGOs can actually hardly influence Chinese news agenda.

Conclusion

Taking the WeChat group LUT as a case, which consisted of China's major climate NGOs and journalists, we explored how NGO professionals work with Chinese journalists. Drawing on the community of practice theory, we saw the potential for Chinese NGOs and journalists working on climate change to form such a community. Through interacting with each other, NGO professionals and journalists formed a shared repertory of knowledge on climate change, which was characterized by a consensus on the climate fact and the orientation to climate policy. Having the superiority in climate expertise, INGOs and journalists working for commercial media and as freelancers were in the center, in contrast to domestic NGOs and journalists working for state-run media on the periphery. There were various types of interpersonal relationships among NGO professionals and journalists apart from their professional connections. Private, informal, interpersonal relationships acted as the facilitator of the NGO–journalist collaboration. These relationships, especially transorganizational or transinstitutional ones, gave such a potential community an "interwoven" texture. INGOs appeared to be the primary designers of such a potential community, which suggested the effectiveness of INGOs' media strategy.

In this study, we argue that when analyzing Chinese (climate) NGO–journalist relations, it is necessary to take into account two factors—namely, expertise and interpersonal relationships. Experts are one of the four normative roles of NGOs in society, alongside advocates, facilitators of dialogue, and critics, according to Powers (2018). NGOs were found valuing their role as experts, in a way to meet news values such as accuracy (Fenton, 2010; Powers, 2016). For NGOs working in China, we agree that acting as experts is an adaptive activity in the Chinese social-political context out of a pragmatic spirit, in line with other observations (e.g., Brooks, 2012). In an unfavorable environment for advocates and critics, NGOs keep a neutral and cooperative position vis-à-vis media and governments. This gives NGOs more chance to influence the media and then realize the ultimate goal (i.e., influencing the policymaking of climate change). As an interviewed NGO director said, "If any of our opinions happens to be read by a policy maker and leaves an impression, that would be really something."

The value of interpersonal relationships for NGOs' media work has started to receive scholarly attention. For example, studying Mexican human rights NGOs, McPherson (2016) concluded that interpersonal relationships, such as friendships featuring trust, credibility, and reciprocity with journalists, are extremely valuable for NGOs to boost source credibility. Interpersonal relationships can play a bigger role, as hiring former journalists to do media work has been common among NGOs (Wright, 2019). These journalists transfer news criteria to NGOs when creating content (Fenton, 2010). In China, they may also bring the additional benefit of *guanxi*, a dyadic relationship with which people are bound to follow the social norm of maintaining long-standing relationships, mutual commitments, and reciprocal obligations (Luo, 2011, p. 329). Accomplishing tasks by mobilizing *guanxi* is a cultural phenomenon in Chinese social life. This accounts for the particularly significant role of interpersonal relationships in Chinese NGO–journalist relations.

Although there is a potential for NGO professionals and journalists to form an interwoven community, we hardly see sufficient evidence for the blurring of NGOs and news media in China. The observed NGO–journalist interactions did not dismiss the institutional identity of actors. They instead demonstrated the heterogeneous journalistic cultures in China. Since commercial media are peripheral in the Chinese media landscape, the relative closeness of NGOs and commercial media indicated that it was difficult for NGOs to exert influence on state-run media, which actually dominate the discursive power in China.

One may say that NGOs are not so neutral as they appear, and their media strategies should be subject to critique as well. However, in Chinese climate communication, NGOs remain an institutionally weak and poorly heard player (Greenberg, Knight, & Westersund, 2011) compared with the government as a dominant authority. Instead of manipulating journalists for organizational ends, NGOs seem more likely to bring Chinese climate journalism progressive effects, speaking for values of environmental justice and public good that other organizations can hardly afford (Russell, 2013) and thus diversifying the news story. Therefore, this study still considers that the voices of NGOs in Chinese media should be welcomed.

The field of climate change in China is still open and evolving, and so is Chinese climate communication. The future way and extent that NGOs participate in China's transition to a low-carbon development model will depend on how they negotiate with opportunities and constraints (Moriggi, 2016). Community of practice theory also suggests that the climate NGO–journalist relation will not be static and depend on the ongoing interactions. This study is one of the first explorations of media work of climate NGOs in China, which can serve as a call for more empirical and theoretical research of this dynamic field.

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