

Globalization of Mediated Spaces: The Case of Transnational Environmentalism in China

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This study takes a network perspective on media globalization, demonstrating how transnational civil society provides linkages that circulate norms and globalize mediated spaces. Based on interviews in China with the most prominent transnational environmental NGOs, I describe their institutional position and strategies through interactions with media, other civil society groups, and the government. Supported by case study examples, I argue that this transnational network, bound together via a problem-solving logic and connecting with more localized structures, enables adaptation to the authoritarian constraints of Chinese society and, in providing global linkages, contributes to the quality and transparency of issue discourse. This holds for not only the environment but, one can speculate, other issues arenas as well.

Keywords: China, environmentalism, globalization, journalism, media, NGOs

Global challenges transcend local concerns and national systems, requiring transnational coordination and engagement to solve them. Coalitions of policy advocates, officials, and citizens, rooted in a host of digital platforms, have carried the hopes of media globalization optimists for more transparent means of cross-border communication, but others have questioned this global village “myth” of a media-supported public sphere (Hafez, 2007). Skeptics point, for example, to enduring national news prisms and limited audiences for international media. A less media-centric perspective, however, yields a different view, emphasizing a public sphere constituted in global communication networks (Castells, 2008). Such networks provide synchronized pathways for globalizing social practices and the expectations citizens have of them—whether accounting and architecture or media and journalism (Reese, 2010). These growing networks of global civil society provide a particularly important political connectivity around such issues as human rights and the environment, most visibly seen in those international groups labeled “nongovernmental organizations” (NGOs). Transnational NGOs (TNGOs), in particular, illustrate the dialectical relationship between global and local, as they adapt a global project to diverse local contexts but also—in a larger sense of media globalization—connect local mediated spaces to global norms and conversation.

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TNGOs engage with particular issues through a nexus of policy actors, including media, citizens, indigenous grassroots groups, government officials, and experts. As Sassen (2006) argues, social science has been better at studying these kinds of institutions, to which I would add media, within a framework of nation-state interactions, but global processes are revealed more broadly through thick description of how the global is articulated into localities. Thus, beyond their interactions with specific media organizations, this approach leads me to ask how NGOs embed themselves into broader local networks to help create discursive, mediated spaces, which are not completely defined by their national container.

Study Purpose

In this study, I take the perspective that media globalization lies in those mediated spaces connected by a structure of transnational linkages, which brings a synchronization of norms across national boundaries. As one way of exemplifying this structure, I examine an important transnational group of advocates for the environment, an issue that naturally lends itself to global advocacy and problem solving. Specifically, I consider how that process works in the case of one particular national context, China, where civil society involvement has expanded in recent years to help develop a “green public sphere” (Yang & Calhoun, 2007). China will play a key role in managing threats to the world’s environment and desperately needs to address its own challenges with expertise and resources from abroad but is wary of foreign influence. Although designated a national priority, the government must manage the tension between environmental protection and economic growth (e.g., Shapiro, 2012). A dynamic system of media and digital networks is accompanied in China by strict political control and surveillance, presenting a particularly complex and compelling opportunity to examine the power of transnational networks to produce social change.

The largest environmental transnational NGOs working in China describe how they approach their work, particularly in their communication strategies. Beyond their specific environmental programs, campaigns, and contribution to the larger movement, however, I want to understand the logic that characterizes these particular groups and allows them to adapt to local circumstances. How does their transnational status affect their ability to produce social change, not only directly through their advocacy but indirectly in shaping this issue-based mediated space? Based on these insights and supported by case study examples, I show how this NGO-based transnational network is bound together via a problem-solving logic that enables adaptation to the authoritarian constraints of Chinese society and, by providing global linkages, contributes beyond their specific projects and programs to the quality and transparency of issue discourse—not only in the environmental area but, one can speculate, for other issues arenas as well.

Transnational Networks and Civil Society

Prominent international environmental organizations are used as the starting point in this study to exemplify an important dynamic of global networks. Such groups play a key role in what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call *transnational advocacy networks*, communicative structures “distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation” (p. 1), connecting citizens, activists, experts, journalists, and officials around issues such as global health, human rights, and the

environment. Although digitally facilitated social movements, such as Occupy, have become more prominent in recent years (e.g., Juris, 2012), Bennett and Segerberg (2013) distinguish this kind of crowd-enabled *connective* action (functioning without central leadership) from the more coordinated, organizationally brokered *collective* action, to which the NGOs contribute and which is my focus here. Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) are recognized as a distinct, advocacy-oriented category within this mix, although its boundaries are fluid. Indeed, ecological sustainability intersects with social justice to create what Hawken (2007) calls the largest social movement in history, with more than a million groups falling within this broad classification.

The far-flung components of transnational NGOs are bound together according to the rules of their enterprise, but these groups become more broadly institutionalized to the extent that they adopt common logics that characterize their joint mission and outlook (e.g., global “NGO-speak”). Apart from the more formally stipulated (and state-sustained) “rules of the road,” norms, treaties, and agreements that constitute international regimes, by this logic I mean common understandings, not always explicit, that characterize institutional members, the practices, beliefs, values, and assumptions that organize the work of a sector and give it meaning (e.g., Friedland & Alford, 1991). These organizations do not have an automatic, predetermined influence just because they are transnational; they constitute dynamic structures revealed and shaped by these logics. And they play an important bridging role as the backbone of transnational civil society (Florini, 1999), providing connecting links among key global nodes. This allows the flow of expertise, concepts, and norms, facilitating the interaction of like-minded social actors and a larger global conversation. They are the means by which something global is articulated into the local.

China’s Green Public Sphere

China serves as a case study for examining the larger issues of transnational networks, in a state not characterized by transparency, where media practices are constrained and censored, yet with the full range of media forms available. China’s civil society sector is still relatively new but has grown rapidly, and its *nongovernmental* quality alone suggests that it has helped carve out room apart from the state for sociopolitical influence. NGOs must tread carefully, however, to avoid confrontation and direct political action, and they are not always governed by a consistent policy, making their relationship with the state complex and at times precarious. Environmental groups have grown rapidly and been given more official latitude, given the issue’s importance as a national priority. Beginning with the World Wildlife Federation in 1980, foreign ENGOs have been allowed, connecting these efforts to a larger global effort through both formal institutional ties and more general sharing of expertise, not to mention financial support. Although such foreign organizations are permitted (at a carefully controlled number and pace), the Chinese government has recently warned against the “universal values” of, among others, human rights, media independence, and civic participation.

The effectiveness of foreign funding and transnational NGOs in Chinese civil society has its doubters. Spires (2012), for example, investigated foreign-sponsored training programs intended to “build capacity” in Chinese groups, teaching best practices in NGO management, governance, and accountability. He concludes that these efforts, contrary to their progressive image, serve mainly to channel citizen

efforts into conforming to acceptable management techniques and practices already approved by the state—and to drain off social energy from seeking real democratization. Franceschini (2014) similarly concludes that the uncoordinated and fragmented Chinese labor NGOs have weak relations with their worker constituents, a precarious relationship with the government, and dysfunctional dependency relationships with international supporters. In Spires' (2012) fieldwork, however, Chinese NGO trainees said they valued the opportunity to be part of a common social agenda: to know they were not alone. They appreciated the opportunity to share experiences, successes, and failures and to be able to assign concepts to what they had experienced. Perhaps this is the most valuable international intervention: to bring local groups into a larger global conversation—which, in the case of environmental advocacy, is a critical part of the process, beyond just teaching specific conservation practices. The TNGOs of interest in this study are not just in the training business, and, although still a relatively small sector of the Chinese civil society, their influence cannot be so easily dismissed. As argued earlier, they play a significant role in providing wider local and global connections.

Chinese Media Space

The Chinese media have evolved rapidly since state control was eased in favor of market-supported commercial news, with journalism becoming more professionalized and aggressive (Pan, 2010; Tong, 2007). Consequently, fault lines have grown between press freedom and government control, which is strategically relaxed when helpful to encourage social stability ("blowing off steam") and monitor local officials (Jiang, 2010). The Chinese microblogging version of Twitter, Weibo, and more recent digital tools allow an emerging generation of journalists to find support among their professional community, circumvent restrictions, and self-publish—as in the case of a 2011 high-speed rail crash in eastern Zhejiang province that killed 40 and led to a wave of censorship-defying investigative reporting (Hille, 2011). More broadly, Yang (2009) observes that the Web provides a strategic opportunity and resource for the new Chinese civil society, which he argues reveals a vibrant utopian impulse. The government's propaganda department still censors certain stories, but its efforts are made increasingly difficult by online circulation, creative word use by netizens to avoid detection, and the viral explosions of citizen comments that feed the growth of "mass incidents" (Chen & Reese, 2015; Reese & Dai, 2009), officially defined as collective petitions, protests, and other activities that threaten to disrupt public order. Many of these incidents involve environmental issues, where the traditional media space has been relatively open, routinized with special news editions and online environmental sections (e.g., Xie, 2011).

Globalization of Mediated Spaces

This study considers the boundary-spanning role of transnational NGOs as they carry out their environmental work in China, and how they contribute to the globalization of mediated spaces. With the term *mediated space*, I want to suggest something beyond an advocacy campaign or limited interaction with a news organization. Rather, these spaces are rooted in networked structures, which become embedded in local and national settings and transcend any single media platform or institution. This idea reflects new conceptions of journalism itself, moving beyond its professional boundaries to encompass, in Benkler's (2011) terms, a wider *networked fourth estate*, combining professional and participatory journalistic forms, and created by the nonlinear, more collaborative, less hierarchical interaction of

professional, citizen and institutional actors. In that respect, journalists have become nodes in a *networked journalism*, a larger eco-system of information flow (Haak, Parks, & Castells, 2012). Similarly, TNGOs engage with other key actors—professional, expert, official, journalist, and citizen—to constitute a communicative structure organized around a social issue. The mediated spaces these structures give rise to suggest a fluid subnational aspect as they open, close, and overlap.

Transnational influence operates through this structure both directly and indirectly. In the more visibly observed direct process, these TNGOs frame and promote issue positions: releasing their own reports, participating in social media conversations, carrying out original reporting, and, to varying degrees, seeking media access and news coverage of their activities (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Powers, 2015). Thus, in the traditional news–source relationship, they engage with journalists and specific media organizations in publicity seeking, just like any other large bureaucratic enterprise. In doing so, they provide an important source of globally circulating messages (Waisbord, 2011).

Transnational groups promote specific ideas, whether childhood immunization or conservation practices, but in addition they advocate more indirectly on behalf of “humanity” for larger civil society values, such as environmental stewardship, human rights, and rule of law. To the extent that they serve as global bridges, we can also ask how they contribute by their very presence to a broader social transparency and the quality of mediated spaces, beyond traditional dimensions of press freedom (where China scores low). As carriers of larger values while embedded within host cultures, they illustrate a more complex process of social change than the more visible forms of advocacy. The mechanism for this dynamic resembles Fourcade’s (2006) description of the transnationalization of the economics profession. Foreign investors bring lawyers and consultants to a country, who then are able to “impose their own definition of reality—their norms, concepts, language, tools, and so on—to eventually engage in a profound reconstruction of the local economic setting” (p. 150). She argues that the traditional diffusion metaphor associated with imperialism does not capture this dynamic of deep transformation. I would argue that a similar dynamic is at work with the globalizing institutional field of environmentalism: circulating experts, interacting with local think tanks, introducing models and best practices. To the extent that journalists and their larger mediated spaces connect with these circuits, they also are subject to deep transformation.

Returning to the general questions asked earlier, I pose two, more specific, research questions as I attempt to sort out the dynamics of interaction among the state, civil society, and media. In the first case, a network of NGOs can be identified, but its transnational power is significant to the extent the NGOs coalesce around shared practices and understandings—a logic that reveals their adaption to local contexts. Thus:

RQ1: To what extent are the transnational environmental NGOs working in China characterized by a shared institutional logic?

Having identified the extent and nature of this institutional coherence, I want to know what consequences this logic has for mediated spaces, particularly the extent to which in their network bridging role they enhance openness and transparency of those spaces. Thus:

RQ2: How do these groups engage with others in local networks of policy actors to contribute to mediated spaces around environmental issues?

Method

The transnational ENGOs (TENGOs) selected for this project are the largest such organizations operating internationally, most based in the United States, with at least one office in China (most often Beijing). They are typically located in the capital, with greater access to policy makers, corporate partners, and international expatriate communities. I obtained, with the help of local Chinese colleagues, interviews with representatives of these groups in their China offices over the course of three visits in 2010, 2011, and 2012 (different groups each time), describing the project in my e-mail introduction as a study of international NGOs, especially in the environmental area, and the "challenges faced by professionals in global organizations as they adapt to local circumstances." Given their international orientation, offices were generally responsive, and communication in advance of the meetings was relatively straightforward. One or two local Chinese colleagues were present at each interview to assist as liaison and with occasional translation issues. Semistructured interviews lasted about 90 minutes, were conducted in English, and transcribed later. Additional interviews were conducted in Beijing for insights into NGO work in China, including with the most famous grassroots ENGO, Friends of Nature, and one of the largest TNGOs, the Ford Foundation. (See Appendix for interview questions.)

In addition to these interviews, firsthand observation, published material in English, and translated information from the Chinese press added details about specific cases. Questions dealt generally with their group's values and style, relationships with the larger organization and other local partners, and journalists and the media. I asked them to evaluate the general state of environmental reporting and, toward the end of each interview, any difficulties or political sensitivities they faced in disseminating their messages. Over the three phases of my visits, I would discuss my insights with local colleagues to test my understanding and refine my interview questions. In conducting the analysis, I was guided by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to review field notes and interview materials for codes, concepts, and broader themes.

TENGOs and Their Institutional Space

TENGOs in China share an environmental focus and an international dimension to their organizational structure but vary greatly in resources and corporate style, each seeking its own niche. Some have impressive offices reflecting those resources, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), based in the central business district (across the street from the former U.S. Embassy); the World Resources Institute in a Soho office complex; and Conservation International, located in a gated-access luxury office building, housing a Starbucks on the ground floor with an international clientele. Beijing Greenpeace, by contrast, is on the third floor of an apartment building in a relatively quiet, mixed-use neighborhood, a block off the larger highway. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and International Union for Conservation of Nature are located in the diplomatic compound section of Beijing, close to embassies and other international organizations. The offices of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), reflecting its long ties

with the government as the first foreign ENGO invited in, are located centrally within the walls of the Forbidden City.

Although varied in resources, style, and mission, the TENGOS are part of the same organizational field. They know of one another's work and have similar challenges, including a somewhat precarious status with the government. Among them is a web of interconnections formed by common schooling, informal ties and friendships, joint meetings, conferences, and projects that involve linkups with scientists, policy makers, and academic experts. In addition to direct cooperative partnerships, they link among themselves to grassroots NGOs, media, and even government through the circulation of personnel. Many TENGO staffers have, for example, been journalists at one time and vice versa. TNC-China, for example, facilitated a Green Salon for environmental journalists to share practices and hear from officials, an initiative assisted by a media relations officer formerly with *China Youth Daily*. Representatives from these groups had mixed feelings about the political context they navigate, generally optimistic about increasing openness—for which they thought the government acknowledged a need—but aware of areas of sensitivity not worth violating. While recognizing that China's leadership faced daunting challenges, some were frank in acknowledging that a lack of transparency in the decision-making process and a democratic disconnect between public opinion and outcomes were a root cause of many social problems. They appreciated that the country had come a long way in a short time but that political instability was still a risk to be avoided. Former president Hu Jintao promoted the idea of sustainable development, so in general the government claims a scientific development perspective and is receptive to adopting many of the international standards that TENGOS promote.

Transnational status gives these organizations special advantages over grassroots groups in resources, research capacity, access to expertise, international perspective, and recognized brand. In sharing examples from the most advanced projects around the world, TENGOS help connect Chinese policy makers to best practices and are perceived as representing something new. So local NGO partners eager for capacity-building opportunities seek them out. Their transnational vantage point also allows them to monitor and address problems caused by multinational firms, which may be based in one location but cause problems in another. When a Greenpeace report, for example, sent via international media and directly to companies, came to the attention of a Japanese company about pollution from its Chinese subsidiary, it strengthened Greenpeace's influence with a local NGO partner—which may have spent weeks trying to work with journalists and getting nowhere reaching local polluters. The Greenpeace communication director said,

You can see how local NGOs want to work with us. They could go to these pollution sites with Greenpeace and could see how we would be producing these reports—for example, how they could have their name mentioned in our reports. That would help their credibility.

The Chinese government, on the other hand, regards Greenpeace with distrust for its sensationalistic reputation and "pushing the envelope." The media, taking their cue from the government's posture, regard Greenpeace with some sensitivity as well, even while valuing its ability to make news. In one instance, one of the largest Beijing newspapers covered a Greenpeace media event opposing the use of

disposable wooden chopsticks at a restaurant, but a propaganda ministry directive prevented mentioning Greenpeace by name. So the photo referred to it only as "an international ENGO."

The same qualities that advantage transnational groups also can be a detriment. Even with local Chinese staff, they may lack familiarity with local conditions and encounter mistrust and cultural gaps. As the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) head (Chinese but U.S.-educated) said, "They always second-guess your motivation. You know, 'Why are you here?' Right? We are Chinese, but 'You work for a U.S. organization. What do you guys want? What's the purpose? You are not earning any money here.'" Nor, he says, in many cases is EDF even earning its reputation in China, strategically choosing at times to "hide behind the scenes" and not reveal its involvement.

TENGOs vary in the extent to which they rely on media to carry out their mission. One may be tempted to assume that all such organizations naturally seek favorable publicity for their efforts, but not given the cultural and political context in China. Greenpeace adopts the most campaign-oriented approach to seeking publicity through bearing witness and sharing the often sensationalistic results, while others prefer a less confrontational style. The larger groups all have experienced professionals on staff (often former news professionals) in charge of their significant communication efforts, ranging from the usual formal reports and media events to sophisticated use of blogs, Weibo, and joining the netizen conversation around mass incidents. While seeking proper credit in the media for their efforts ("Didn't mention our name—not good for us!"), they are still strategic about how much media attention to court. NRDC is media oriented but says it knows how to stay in the background. WWF regards media as a "very good friend" but is still selective about when to involve them. Interestingly, the more media-savvy NGO officials were also more positive about the quality of the journalists they interacted with.

Others are decidedly not media oriented, preferring to work behind the scenes, even letting the government or local partners take the credit where appropriate. EDF says it does not do media for media's sake, preferring to build trust first and in some cases actively excluding media until decisions are completed. As a membership-based group, the International Union for Conservation of Nature provides a platform, where in many cases it would be premature to invite media. (My interviewee there admitted her lack of media-relations confidence, "How do I cooperate with journalists, since I'm too afraid of them?") One leader even said being science-based made publicity unnecessary: "We don't seek publicity for ourselves. We show the government what we do, and then they realize and trust you." The Ford Foundation (not technically an environmental NGO but participating in that space with major financial resources) also makes a deliberate effort to work behind the scenes through other groups. Ford is certainly media savvy, but it takes this principle farthest, claiming its international strategy is to "keep out of the media."

Beyond their specific media promotional strategies, however, these groups play a more indirect, coordinative role. They provide expertise and credible sources of news, based on international connections and reputation, to both government and commercial media, which share an interest in environmental news. One former World Resources Institute employee and former journalist for *China Daily* explained that

Sometimes if we [World Resources Institute] want to send a message to officials in one ministry, we will invite [that ministry's affiliated] newspaper's reporter to report, because those officials need to follow what's going on, so they'll read their ministry's publication.

Another form of indirect impact on media lies in the convening power of groups like the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which can bring media representatives together with scientists and government officials. Journalists may not get immediate newsworthy information when Chatham House ground rules are in force (free exchange with confidentiality), but the meetings contribute to normative coordination among the groups.

A Transnational Logic

The first research question asks to what extent these groups operate with a shared institutional logic. Beyond their special areas of environmental focus, they do seem to share a common fact-based problem-solving approach in their commitment to the environment, a common *modus operandi* that permits them to plug in and navigate within a global context. Their methods are similar—in emphasizing cooperation, expertise, and demonstration of effective techniques, not confrontation and publicity. This solution-oriented reputation is thought to bring respect:

When you first look it seems like Mission Impossible, but you can always find a point that is positive and try to be useful. We don't come to criticize, but to solve the problem. We don't want to be the hero. It won't help China. . . . We're coming with real solutions, that we know seems welcome here. . . . Nowadays most NGOs convert themselves to this kind of style—even Greenpeace, which has a different work approach.

One local representative even said it was sometimes necessary to advocate this kind of strategy to his organization's U.S.-based leadership, which might at times urge a more combative stance:

If they [the government] say no, and we [Conservation International] say yes, then you won't solve any problems.

Author: That's the end of the conversation.

Yeah, so we keep a door open. Then we see if there are any solutions.

With its stated commitment to documentation in its mission, Greenpeace's self-styled "different approach" follows a similar strategy despite its more confrontational image:

Our job is to actually get the dirt from underneath the rug. If there is a problem, we'll definitely have to point out that problem. But it will probably work better if we say this is the problem, and, at the same time, this is the solution. It makes more sense—either economically politically, socially, sustainability reasons, development reasons—to do this. But you always need to bring up the solution, not just point out "this is the problem."

Taking a science-based, solution-oriented approach, WWF lists fieldwork "demonstration" as one of its main pillars.

For example, in the central lower Yangtze, we were saying to the local partners several years ago it will be dangerous for the lakes to be separated from the main river. They will say, "Show us," and we will say, "OK, we show you." So if we call it a strategy, it's a very smart one. "I don't want to force you to believe me. I'm right, you're wrong." I say, "Give me one or two years and let's see if it will work."

This commitment to evidence, according to WWF, leads the organization to be careful not to go public via the media until it has done the "convincing research," a caution its representative said outside observers misinterpreted as being fearful of the government. In arguing for his organization as the most effective TENG problem solver, EDF's China representative credited his Carnegie Mellon PhD for shaping his utilitarian approach.

EDF's model is finding the ways that work. . . . We are utilitarians, and we seek for efficiency in solving environmental problems. . . . I think in terms of really finding the ways that work, EDF probably is the organization that has the full embodiment of that spirit. Deng Xiaoping himself advocated a utilitarian approach, right? He said, "Whether it's a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches a mouse, it's a good cat." To me, that's a very utilitarian perspective.

Considering that government permission for NGOs could be withdrawn at any time, this problem-solving logic provides a protective image: constructive and collaborative. In navigating within the Chinese political system, this logic has three useful functions: It allows the TENG to be *above* politics with an ultimate faith in apolitical empiricism; to work *around* politics in a way that avoids taboos and does not breach any sensitive boundaries; and a way *through* politics, as a relationship-building strategy with government in accomplishing common goals.

In the first case, these groups often take the approach that this logic transcends political sensitivities and therefore need not bring them into areas that are off-base. Several representatives said they could simply choose not to venture near sensitive areas by sticking to their area of policy expertise. "My principle," one leader said, "is just telling the truth. Give the answer based on the facts and analysis." He argued that he does not usually venture near sensitive political issues in sticking with his area of general policy expertise.

For me, as environmental people we don't address political issues, because that's another issue, but we talk about environmental issues, and the media people address them too. I think Chinese media and Chinese society are open enough to allow me to express my opinion independently for this kind of issue.

The redlines, however, are never far away, and TENGs are aware that taking this problem-solving perspective makes life easier with the government. So, in the second case, the logic serves an intentional

strategy designed to skirt potential minefields, allowing them to go *around* them, making the same points in a more effective manner. As Greenpeace reported,

We came up with a simple name, "sharing the blame." Put everybody into that report. It is Indonesia's problem, it is a Chinese problem, it's the consumer market in Europe, also in Australia, in America, in Canada, you know like it is everybody's problem. Let's share the blame at the same time. Try to stop this problem together. So if you put it that way it will be a bit easier for the Chinese government. . . . I mean so you can change the language into more economic language. You get a much bigger picture. You are not just making trouble. You sound more scientific, more positive in that way—you know, like you can spin the message, like China could be developing just as fast without destroying the environment.

This, he claims, does not mean the group self-censors or soft-pedals its basic message, but rather finds a way for it to be expressed in a way amenable to both media needs and state sensitivities.

And, third, because TENGOS rely on government partners to implement their policies, they must present themselves as worthy collaborators. They must work *through* politics, and the problem-solving logic facilitates these relationships. As the NRDC representative said,

We come here to be humble, as a friend saying, "We know you have this problem. We have this solution and the resources you need. We can work together." Our role here is to brand us as "trusted adviser" and "information source to China's opinion leaders." Our U.S. colleagues didn't get it at first. It's commonsense; no one wants to hear a foreign NGO say, "China is the biggest polluter in the world."²

The International Union for Conservation of Nature also adopts this cooperative methodology, partnering, for example, with the International Crane Foundation and Wildlife International to warn the government of ecological risk from a proposed dam at Poyang Lake in Jiangxi province, offering to help find a solution with its international experience.

Human Rights

As mentioned earlier, the environmental discourse overlaps with human rights, always a sensitive issue in China, so environmentalism provides a way to discuss rights safely—and indeed these TENGO leaders speak of the work they are doing as in support of it. In that respect, human rights is not easily

² This branding success was confirmed after the interview, when a fellow metro passenger saw our tote bag with the NRDC logo and asked if we worked there and could introduce him. He said he worked for All-China Federation of Supply and Marketing Co-operatives, a government-organized NGO working on sustainable green agriculture. As a "solution-oriented" organization, "trusted adviser," and friend of the government, an endorsement from NRDC would aid such an organization in marketing green agriculture to consumers. (We said we were just doing research, but gave him the phone number.)

disentangled from their policy mission, and the problem-solving logic is the way into this larger discussion. As the head of one of the smaller groups exclaimed,

Human rights, human rights, you're [outsiders] always talking about human rights! We start from a technical solution to resolving heavy metal pollution that has a significant impact on people's health. If we can get this resolved we are contributing to human rights. We do not want to talk too much about human rights or other topics because we believe without this healthy environment we have nothing to talk about.

According to its materials, the World Resources Institute deems energy access—and more specifically, access to “clean” energy—as a human rights issue. For EDF protecting the environment is protecting humans, showing the integration of the rights and environment discourse: “EDF is very human centered. We do this, we protect the environment, we protect the air, we protect the ocean, we protect biodiversity; it's because we want to protect the human being.” Putting “people at the center,” Conservation International argues that people can't survive without a healthy ecosystem, and the organization made a major change in its mission a few years ago to also “support local people's livelihood.” Friends of Nature reflects this same discourse at the grassroots level, arguing that the inferential leap from environment to human rights is clear: “About human rights, we normally don't touch that perspective but we will focus on the environment and how it will then change and affect those people, and they can connect the dots (but we won't do that job).”

Shaping Mediated Spaces

The second research question asks how these groups shape mediated spaces around environmental issues. I've shown how they position themselves as suppliers of information and as coordinative linking structures, but with what ultimate result in the character of those spaces? The problem-solving logic characterizing these groups complements most visibly the professional routines of journalism, but also the expectations of citizens and opportunities provided by digital media platforms to enhance broader values of transparency. This logic makes these groups sympathetic and highly compatible partners with journalists. As one spokesman said, “Environment is a comparatively open area, and it's quite technical and journalists are very solution oriented. They not only point to the problem but include suggestions or quote international experience and examples, saying, ‘Can we learn from these examples?’”

As its representative said, “WWF has always been science-based, solution-oriented, so in general journalists just like us, and they take us as a high level provider of information.” Media value the investigations of NGOs as a source of information, even if they are not always able to report freely on them. Reporters will skillfully avoid sensitive lines by reframing stories. As the Greenpeace representative said,

When I talk to journalists who are trying to be real journalists, there is a sense that both Greenpeace and these media are in quite similar situations. For example, I mean for

media, they may not be able to talk about one issue, but they will not lie about that issue. That's their bottom line.

Thus, these deeper structures have created an opportunity for truth telling, not always readily apparent with a focus strictly on censorship. The linkages between NGO investigative work and journalists help circumvent both government and media sensitivities.

For example, a 2010 pipeline explosion caused an oil tanker to spill its cargo near the eastern coastal city of Dalian, creating an environmental catastrophe for the major oil production and distribution area. Greenpeace sent a team to investigate, finding the situation significantly worse than reported in the mainstream media and by the government's news agency. Optimistic reports from the Ministry of Agriculture through the China News Agency sought to reassure the public that there had been no damage to marine life. Journalists were discouraged from going to Dalian by their editors, and local officials reassured them the problem would soon be resolved. As a result, with no support from other local NGOs, the public, or other journalists, Greenpeace was, for a time, the only voice sharing eyewitness information about the spill, contradicting official accounts. After two weeks, Greenpeace held a press conference in Beijing and released an analysis showing the amount of oil spilled, the extent of local government action, and the environmental impact. Its reports were not picked up by the Xinhua Agency, but microblogging helped distribute the reports to Chinese and international media, creating a breakthrough in the information logjam, particularly by exploiting journalist personal blogs and social media networks: "We realize actually it doesn't matter whether these stories get printed by paper. The stories are traveling through these journalists who are using their personal network to spread the story and spread the truth." This coupling of TENG work and journalistic practices shows how the velocity of information traveling through embedded networks creates spaces that bypass the constraints on traditional media and the censoring that issues threatening social stability usually activate.

TENGs also shape mediated spaces by exerting influence on professional practice, educating journalists in norms of environmental reporting. One group's communication director said that several years ago journalists were unsure how to handle such issues, including stories with negative details.

My first international NGO job was for International Fund for Animal Welfare. When you talk about cruelty to animals in the street, or some dog meat consumption, or all the cruelty to animals, it's a really sad story. People used to say, "No. We don't want to report that." Yeah, it's very difficult. At that time we need to have the journalists understand, "You need to tell the story, a true story, and you need to tell better how to change people's minds with your stories." You need to balance this.

The ongoing Environmental Press Awards, sponsored since 2010 by the Nature Conservancy, the London-based NGO China Dialogue, and *The Guardian* (UK), have provided a form of professional legitimation and social capital for journalists. The awards provide a barometer of progress in journalistic autonomy and willingness to tackle difficult issues (for more details, see Dong, 2013). About the awards, one TENG attendee praised the improvement in environmental reporting:

There are so many taboos, but they can still write so many good stories. When they looked at them they shared the feeling that there were so many good articles. None of them go beyond the line or touch a political issue, but at the same time they bring out some breaking news. Many of those articles really helped the progress in policies and triggered a lot of positive consequences after publication. That gave us hope. And all the winners are so young, most under 30, and they are the hope of journalism in China.

Through professional guidance and journalistic legitimation, transnational groups contribute to shaping the norms in the wider media space. They do this in ways compatible with both state sensitivities and journalistic hunger for information—through emphasizing best practices, empirical results, and how they relate to existing state goals. The result is a different form of advocacy—for openness, as their problem-solving logic fosters transparency. The Pollution Information Transparency Index, promoted by the NRDC and the renowned Chinese environmentalist Ma Jun's Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, illustrates this contribution. Although progress, as measured by the index, has been uneven in cities releasing important environmental data to the public (Wong, 2013), it has been accepted as an important social contribution. An NRDC official reported that:

As a foreign NGO, you are commenting on the Chinese government, each city government, how are they doing in open information. The information itself is sensitive, and now you are giving them scores, and sometimes you give them such a low score. How do you do that? At the beginning, we think it's undoable, but later we make it doable and make it very popular news in Chinese media. We try to bring out the best practices.

The transnationals develop relationships with grassroots NGOs that can facilitate the flow of information—not always in the direct style of press releases but through the larger network. Ironically, the large transnational groups with all their resources and communication capacity may be reluctant to speak directly to an issue—but they can facilitate the ability of Chinese groups to say something. As one grassroots group reported,

TNC has been helping us a lot during our campaigns against the dam, one that will cut the natural protected area for endangered fish, and they did thorough research with the kind of expertise and all these international reputations, so they provide many important raw materials, but they feel a little bit sensitive to stand up and directly oppose this damn. So we say all these things. We brought all this information and this standpoint to conferences, to other government bodies, and to the media.

It appears that the problem-solving logic of the transnationals makes them advocates not only on their own behalf but indirectly in the interest of empiricism and best practices, which allows a broader normative framework of transparency to emerge. This has encouraged grassroots NGOs to exploit this same framework in an attempt to harmonize state policy with reality—avoiding direct criticism but pointing out where the law is not being upheld. Similarly, journalists are able to document the discrepancies between NGO report data and those released by the government, creating public pressure

for new regulation. Indeed, lack of transparency causes the central government itself difficulty enforcing its policies, so this pressure toward openness and accountability can also work in its favor.

One final example shows how a TENGO served as a catalyst to bring together a mix of policy actors, including the government. Beginning in 2006, WWF carried out firsthand journalistic investigation of pollution in Hunan Province's Dongting Lake, one of the biggest freshwater lakes in China, ringed by several chemical, fertilizer, and paper mill factories. Eluding enforcement, these companies contributed to the erosion of water quality. According to the WWF representative, a project leader rented a boat and invited a sympathetic local environmental department official and member of the Hunan People's Congress to accompany them to see the problem for himself. "That was a risk we took . . . when you bring media from Beijing, they may piss off [the locals], so we are saying to ourselves, why don't we try this." The resulting photos and video documenting the effects of drought, illegal fishing, and pollution were picked up by local media. Later that month, a journalist for Xinhua News Agency (and longtime WWF partner) submitted a report to the State Council using WWF pictures and comments, leading Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to call on the local government for a solution. In January 2007, WWF followed up with an organized media trip, including Hunan and Beijing journalists, which resulted in extensive further coverage. New regulations eventually passed in 2009. According to the WWF, the involvement of the local official played a critical role in the early phase, allowing him to convince other officials, saying, "I saw it, it was real." In this case, WWF did not necessarily receive much coverage itself, but its efforts facilitated discursive space around the problem. As a microcosm of the catalytic TENGO role, WWF provided a link between government, environmentalists, and media, which ultimately led to policy change.

Conclusion

Transnational networks can act as agents of social change by bringing something of the global conversation to particular local settings. In doing so, they illustrate an important form of media globalization. Through their boundary-spanning role they contribute more deeply to mediated spaces than simply through gathering and disseminating information and pursuing their individual publicity goals. TENGOs bear witness with their own investigations and reports, disseminated through journalistic networks, and by serving as a catalyst to bring media organizations together with policy actors around social problems. These resulting mediated spaces may sometimes be fleeting—opening and closing depending on the circumstances—but they are critical moments that reveal a larger global dynamic. In taking a less media-centric, network-oriented perspective, this study shows that these institutional networks provide a means for social change and transcend in many ways the more obvious attempts by the Chinese government to constrain expression and warn against the "peril" of civil society.

In selecting prominent transnational environmental NGOs to exemplify such networks, this study has examined how they operate in a specific and often challenging national context; what institutional space they occupy and help create; what pattern of linkages they provide; and how they facilitate the flow of resources, expertise, and values. These groups speak a common language of environmentalism, but beyond that this study shows that they share a larger fact-based, empirical, problem-solving logic, which, in adapting to political constraints, allows them to transcend, work through, and work with government partners. More importantly from my standpoint, it allows them to couple their work with media practices,

create a symbiotic relationship with journalists, and contribute to larger mediated spaces in ways that, I argue, facilitate and strengthen transparency. Although the environmental arena enjoys some openness in China that may not be true of more politically sensitive issues, it can be a trigger for other issues, such as human rights, governmental corruption, and food safety. And the integration within many NGOs of a rights-based framework for environmental work provides a point of entry into these other domains. When norms are strengthened in one arena, it is likely they will spill over into related areas as social expectations ratchet up. And the same global dynamics should be at work, even if they play out in different ways depending on local circumstances.

Globalization has opened new spaces beyond the primary control of the nation-state—even assertive ones like China—where transnational actors operate with their own emerging logics. Yet the nature of these logics and how they impinge on specific local settings is not well understood. Although the status of foreign groups in China continues to be precarious, the large number of such TNGOs along with thousands of grassroots groups suggests that these subnational civic spaces can exist alongside and within the state. Indeed, this gives Chinese civil society an important role in providing some element of social coordination and citizen involvement within this otherwise opaque governing structure—particularly to the extent that it includes linkages outside the country. In an era of citizen uprisings around the world, the government has been concerned that foreign groups represent a Trojan horse, an agent of destabilization and threat to party hegemony. In a sense, they are a Trojan horse: not the more immediate and direct threat feared by the government but as a potential vehicle for deep transformation through shaping a larger normative structure. This argument touches on a difficult power dynamic in Chinese civil society. Do transnational groups, in their desire to protect their precarious status, play it safe and self-censor, undercutting their ability to effect social change? They do at times, of course, but by focusing on their structural position and “glocalizing” task—connecting global to local—and ability to contribute to more transparent discourse, I’ve taken a different perspective on how social change happens and drawn a more optimistic conclusion.

The contrast in political systems between China and the United States, where most of these TENGOS have their headquarters, provides a compelling example of how transnational networks may bridge widely different contexts. The one-party-dominated political system, coupled with media control and oversight, also provides an intriguing example of how transnational networks may open deliberative space where it might not necessarily be anticipated (especially to Western observers). And, of course, the challenges China faces in the environmental arena are a matter of life and death for the entire world. For all these reasons, China is a valuable case in its own right, but I hope that by looking deeply at this particular national context we may find valuable insights into broader processes. If, as I’ve argued, transnational networks contribute to the globalization of mediated spaces in the direction of openness and transparency, then they will play an increasingly crucial role in global problem solving.

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Appendix: TENGO Interview Questions

General professional

- Would you tell me about yourself and how you came to work with your organization?
- Where do you direct most of your time in your professional activities?

Connections with the larger NGO

- What are the main values that guide your group's work?
- How is your organization connected to the larger group? How do you coordinate your efforts?
- How does being an international NGO help you in your work? Does it provide special leverage (or disadvantages) compared to indigenous groups?
- What challenges do you share in common with other international NGOs? To what extent do you pursue similar strategies?

Communication strategies

- How do you work with journalists and the media to accomplish your goals? What are your communication strategies?
- What are your biggest challenges (particularly communication)?
- What have been some successes in informing the public about your work?

Coordination with other groups

- What other groups do you coordinate or partner with in your work?
- Are there particular meetings, associations, or conferences that have been helpful in linking up with others in the environmental area?