

## **Guidance and Transgression: The Contest for Narratives of Environment and Pollution in China**

### *Commentary*

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The Chinese Communist Party has seen controlling information and guiding opinion as an essential element of power since its earliest days. But the methods of control and guidance have had to evolve radically in the transition from the age of broadcast media (one to many) to the era of networked communications (many to many). This article examines the contest between official and nonofficial media narratives of the environment, pollution, and climate change in China in the early 21st century. It finds that environmental issues provide a rich ground on which to explore fundamental questions about mediating China, particularly when considering the role of the party-state, the prospects for something akin to civil society, and the immediacy of the issue in people's everyday lives.

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Over the past two decades, there has been a dynamic interaction between China's model of development, the country's growing environmental crisis, and changing political and evolving civil society attitudes about the environment. We have seen a growth in environmental protest, demands for greater transparency and accountability in decision making, and the partial recognition of the public's right to be informed and to participate in the decisions that affect their environment.

At the same time, this dynamic has interacted with fundamental changes in China's media: the move from state control to a more liberal market, with new commercial media entering the scene, and the explosive growth of Internet use, which has ended the party-state's monopoly of communications and forced it to adopt new strategies in its attempt to "guide" public opinion. These processes should be understood as intertwined and inseparable.

They have given rise to new dilemmas for a party-state beset by ambivalence toward these developments: The party-state recognizes the need for information transparency and participation, but

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has failed to implement either effectively. It acknowledges that pollution is a crippling problem for China, but allows the laws and regulations aimed at preventing it to be weakened in their drafting by vested interests, then flouted or ignored. And it recognizes the economic value of the Internet and the advantages of a more open society, but seeks to retain for itself close control of public narratives and public information from an earlier era.

Although it may no longer present as a militant Marxist–Leninist party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) nevertheless seeks to legitimize its exclusive hold on power with the claim of vanguard leadership in Chinese society. The parameters of that leadership have changed over time, but neither the party's assertion of the right to lead, nor its efforts to suppress challenges from nonparty entities, has varied significantly.

The party seeks to maintain its narrative dominance negatively, by the suppression of challenging or alternative ideas, as well as positively, through the dissemination of "correct" ideas with which it seeks to guide or "channel" public opinion.

Since its earliest days, the CCP has seen the function of mass media as to serve the party's interests. In the days of analog broadcasting and print media, when messages were transmitted from one to many, maintaining control was relatively straightforward: The means of production and dissemination of information were all under the control of the party-state. In today's networked age, while traditional media remain either in party ownership or under party control, anyone with an Internet connection or a mobile phone can generate and distribute content.

As Tim Weston's article in this Special Section also highlights, today's party narrative of a strong and prosperous China under its firm leadership must compete with alternative views, citizen journalists, and celebrity bloggers for attention. Its own slogans and postures can be mocked and satirized online, and it has been obliged to adopt increasingly elaborate censorship, along with tightening rules on Internet management (MacKinnon, 2008). These allow the state at many levels to suppress, albeit imperfectly, explicitly challenging views (see also Melissa Chan's commentary in this issue).

But censorship is not the same as persuasion: Indeed, it can be counterproductive to successful "guidance," and the CCP also seeks to persuade, through the so-called Fifty Cent Party—paid net activists who post online in the guise of ordinary citizens to influence online opinion (Bandurski, 2013a). In the past two decades, the environment has emerged as one of the most contentious issues between the government and the citizens and therefore between government and journalism.

It is not a straightforward relationship. Some journalists played an important role as environmental activists, notably in opposing dam development on China's rivers, in addition to their more conventional role as reporters. They also made common cause with environmental officials who were frequently frustrated by their own lack of power to prevent pollution or to challenge infrastructure development. Both the journalists and the officials involved in environmental protection argued that information could play an important role in combating environmental degradation, and they were instrumental in promoting regulations on open information and advocating for transparency and official accountability.

At the same time, the state's concern with security as well as the economic interests of big polluters have sought to limit both the activities of the journalists and the development of citizen activism. Environmental journalism, therefore, became a key battleground for trends that were frequently in conflict: the imperative of environmental protection, the effort to encourage environmental awareness, citizen involvement, and access to information, against the state's concerns to maintain security and major economic players' desire to protect their privileges and to avoid censure.

This article explores the key role of environmental journalism in challenging the party-state's monopoly of information and its exclusive right to shape public understanding in the rapidly changing relationship between state and society in China.

### **The Emergence of Environmental Journalism in China**

For the first three decades of the People's Republic, China's official media largely reflected the party's indifference to environmental concerns. Following the UN Conference on the Human Environment in the early 1970s, a number of intellectuals and environmentalists made the first foray into environmental publishing with translations of popular science books such as *Only One Earth* (Ward & Dubos, 1972) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Tsinghua, Beida, and Zhongshan universities initiated China's first degrees in environmental science, and in 1973 China's first environmental periodical, *Environmental Protection*, was launched. As China's long economic boom began, following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, environmental pollution and ecological damage emerged as subjects of sporadic interest.

In 1980, the China Environmental Sciences Press was founded, and on December 31, 1981, CCTV broadcast China's first environmental television show, *Animal World*. By 1983, population control, the rational use of resources, and the protection of the environment were basic national policies, and the media had begun to report on the environment, at least to the extent of noting calendar events such as World Environment Day and the International Day of Tree-planting. In 1983, publication began of *China Environmental News*; the then State Environmental Protection Agency (SEP) jointly launched, with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), a publication entitled *World Environment* (Dong, 2014); and by the end of the 1980s, the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *China Youth Daily* had all added environmental sections.

The emergence of the subject in official media did not, however, imply an unlimited right to criticize official policy, as was illustrated by one of the fiercest public debates on an environmental issue in the 1980s, the controversy over the building of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River. It illustrated the tensions between several emerging trends: a growing civic activism, a demand for more information and transparency in decision making, and the role of journalism in public life. A well-known and well-connected journalist, Dai Qing, played a key role in a conflict that prefigured many subsequent environmental debates, and in which both sides attempted to use information to mobilize public opinion.

### The Three Gorges Dam Controversy

The ambition to dam China's greatest river had a long pedigree. Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) first proposed a dam on the Yangtze River in his 1919 *Plans for National Reconstruction*. The Kuomintang government launched a series of studies in the 1930s, and after 1949, Premier Zhou Enlai was an enthusiast for the project. Political turmoil and a shortage of funds prevented any progress in the Maoist period, but by 1982, the dam was on the official agenda. It was discussed at the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party, and events began to move rapidly. The following year, the State Planning Commission approved a plan, and by September 1984, the first work had begun.

Objections to the dam, however, were also growing (Guo, 2012). In April 1985, Li Rui, an official opponent, published his *Thesis on the Three Gorges*, and 167 members of the Sixth Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing put forward 17 motions calling for a delay (Yushan, 2012). In May 1985, Sun Yueqi, the 92-year-old head of the CPPCC standing committee's economic group, led a CPPCC commission of inquiry on a 38-day fact-finding tour. The commission concluded that the dam posed seven important risks in cost, flood control, siltation, navigation, power generation, the relocation of residents, and safety. Although no major newspaper published the findings, the report to the State Council and the Central Committee of the Communist Party did prompt a further evaluation, but by April 1987, the project was approved.

Nevertheless, one of China's best-known journalists, Dai Qing, persisted in her opposition to the dam and in her efforts to mobilize public opinion in support of the cause. By the beginning of 1989, she had persuaded the Guizhou People's Press to publish *Yangtze! Yangtze!* a collection of critical essays by more than a dozen journalists, herself included (Dai, 1989).

Dai Qing herself later wrote of the struggle to publish *Yangtze! Yangtze!*:

In China, the media is regarded as a propaganda tool of the Communist Party. This is in keeping with Mao Zedong's cardinal doctrine: "Revolution depends on two barrels, the barrel of a gun and the barrel of a pen." Though Chinese citizens hold valuable opinions, they do not have access to the media. The media provides only jingoistic propaganda, such as "we only want to encourage bright communism and to discard decadent capitalism"; and "the Communist Party and its leadership has been great, glorious and errorless." (Dai, 1994)

An alliance of journalists, scientists, engineers, scholars, and military officers jointly organized a press conference in Beijing to draw attention to their objections to the dam, issuing a statement that boldly claimed, "For the first time ordinary Chinese people have decided not to keep silent on a weighty economic policy decision. . . . They don't want to see an endless repetition of foolish policies" (cited in Adams & Williams, 1994, p. xxiii). The *Far Eastern Economic Review* called it "a watershed event . . . as it represented the first use of large-scale public lobbying by intellectuals and public figures to influence the governmental decision-making process" (cited in Adams & Williams, 1994, p. xxiii).

There was disquiet, too, in that year's session of the National People's Congress (NPC), and Yao Yilin, the vice premier of the State Council, announced that construction would be pushed back five more years. Dai Qing's campaign appeared to have scored a victory, but it was to prove short-lived. By June 1989, the student-led democracy movement convulsed the country, and Dai Qing herself was arrested.

Despite her high-level family connections, Dai Qing spent 10 months in a maximum-security prison, *Yangtze! Yangtze!* was banned, and more than 3,000 copies were burned in the publisher's home province of Guizhou. After her release, Dai Qing found herself unable to publish in China's media, and the Three Gorges Dam project was quietly revived.

In August 1991, a new report by the Ministry of Water Resources in favor of construction won the approval of the State Council's Three Gorges project investigation committee. An intense campaign to guide opinion was launched in advance of the March 1992 session of the National People's Congress. Some 3,500 people were mobilized to visit the region and praise the project, and newspapers across China published articles on the forthcoming NPC vote (Guo, 2012).

It was a measure of the unease that the dam continued to provoke that the vote in China's generally compliant parliament was carried with unprecedented levels of both abstention and opposition (1,767 votes in favor, 177 votes against, 664 abstentions, and an additional 25 people who did not vote). Criticism of the dam had been silenced, resurfacing only occasionally in the form of reports of corruption in relocation and, in 2009, in a few reports of the risk that mega dams could exacerbate or trigger earthquakes. The dam has led to many of the negative environmental impacts that its opponents predicted, but few reports on these have been published in China's official media ("China struggles," 2006).

### **Official Media, Protest, and Activist Journalism**

The landmark June 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, in which China participated, stimulated a fresh interest in environmental journalism in official media and reported the conference conclusion that sustainable development should be the strategy of the future. Reporters from *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, *China Environmental News*, and *Science and Technology Daily* accompanied the Chinese delegation and reported the conference extensively. Local media in China followed suit, publishing special sections on the environment and sustainable development, while government and party leaders made speeches and wrote articles for *China Environmental News*.

That year, the Chinese government advanced 10 measures to enhance its environment and development, and in 1994 published *Agenda 21—White Paper on China's Population, Environment, and Development in the 21st Century*. The document put forward China's overall strategy, measures, and a program of action for sustainable development. Two years later, at the Fourth Session of China's Eighth National People's Congress, the Ninth Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Outline of the Long-Term Target for the Year 2010 both acknowledged sustainable development as an important strategy for China's modernization.

As sustainable development became part of official policy, state media fell into line behind the effort to promote it. In 1993, 14 central government ministries and commissions, including the NPC's Environmental and Resources Protection Commission, the Propaganda Department, the Film and Television Bureau, and the State Environmental Protection Agency, launched the so-called Chinese Century of Environmental Protection, using newspapers, radio, television, public information posters, and the Internet for a public environmental information campaign (Dong, 2014).

Some analysts regard the campaign as successful in increasing public understanding of environmental issues, but it had little effect on a growing pollution crisis that had its roots in government prioritization of gross domestic product growth over environmental protection, poor enforcement of regulations, and high carbon energy development.

Indeed, in raising public awareness, the government may have contributed to two factors that were to characterize the early years of the 21st century: a growing interest in more vigorous reporting of environmental violations that would run counter to its own more positive top-down messaging and a growing environmental activism. The Chinese Century of Environmental Protection campaign had been an exercise in top-down environmental communications, but it also raised public awareness of the fact that there were conflicts between megadevelopment and environmental protection.

Dai Qing's pioneering work had been suppressed by the early 1990s, but as the new century dawned, a new generation of activist journalists was to emerge. China's society was changing: Increasingly commercialized media were competing for readers with bolder, investigative stories, and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were beginning to organize around a worsening pollution crisis. China's Internet users were also growing in number, creating a demand for news that was both more interesting and more diverse in its viewpoint than the official offering. Journalists were beginning to have a choice of outlets, and liberal newspapers such as *Southern Weekend* and *Southern Metropolis Daily* were beginning to report on the risks associated with big dams.

These trends were to coalesce in the form of environmentally committed journalism around resistance to big hydro development. Beginning in 2003, the journalist Wang Yongchen led a sustained media campaign against a proposal to dam one of China's last free-flowing rivers, the Nu River (Salween). Wang organized several study visits to the site in China's far west for groups of journalists and ran regular environmental "salons" to improve understanding of the issues among colleagues in Beijing. The resulting coverage of the dam proposals resulted in the project's postponement.

In 2004, Liu Jianqiang, a reporter with the Guangzhou newspaper *Southern Weekend*, traveled to Yunnan Province to report on a new proposal to build a dam on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River (known as the Jinsha) at the celebrated site of Tiger Leaping Gorge (J. Q. Liu, 2013a). Liu was one of the new generation of environmental reporters. The company that was building the Three Gorges Dam had tried to pressure him to cut references to corruption, siltation, and landslides from his reporting, and the experience had left him suspicious of official claims about the benefits of big hydro. He was keen to explore the issues involved in Tiger Leaping Gorge.

From its source on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, the river descends through Sichuan and Yunnan provinces until it cuts through Mount Yulong and Mount Haba, in one of the world's deepest gorges. With a rapid drop in elevation in a relatively short run, Tiger Leaping Gorge offers a tempting site for a dam.

In July 2004, the National Development and Reform Commission approved the *Planning Report on the Damming of the Middle Reaches of the Jinsha River*, which recommended that work should start on an eight-dam cascade that would start at Tiger Leaping Gorge. Advocates of the dams promised both electricity and the capacity to divert water to drought-stricken areas when required. But Liu discovered and reported that construction of the dam had begun long before government approval had been granted. His article was the splash in *Southern Weekend*, under the headline "Emergency at Tiger Leaping Gorge" (see J. Q. Liu, 2013b).

Chinese and international media took up the story, and shortly afterward, Premier Wen Jiabao ordered the project suspended for further investigation. Working with local activists, Liu reported that the official narrative that dams bring prosperity to local people was often untrue: Most of the farmers resettled in previous projects had been left impoverished, and large sums intended for compensation had been embezzled.

For journalists like Liu, environmental reporting offered ways of discussing politics and illuminating the consequences of policy choices without overtly challenging the party's right to rule. Questioning the narrative of progress and development that was used to promote large infrastructure projects was also a challenge to the way such decisions were made without reference to the people most directly affected. Liu was later to contrast the success of the Tiger Leaping Gorge resistance with the failure of similar campaigns, concluding that three elements were necessary for success: local support, media coverage, and active NGOs. In this instance, journalists working with local activists and leveraging the popularity of the expanding commercial media had proven to be a powerful combination (Feng, 2014).

Writing some years after the events, Liu made an explicit connection between the political events of June 1989 and the later campaigns against big hydro, several of which were invoked by Andrew C. Mertha in his book *China's Water Warriors* as evidence of a growing pluralization of Chinese society at this time. "In 1989 many Chinese people took to the streets to fight for democracy," Liu wrote,

But they failed. Twenty years later, many Chinese people have begun to use a more complex and effective means to continue this fights. Of these, environmental protests have been the most successful. As long as democratically minded officials, scholars, reporters and other educated people become aware, democratic rights can be won in the environmental world, bit by bit. . . . The campaign to save Tiger Leaping Gorge should be the Chinese environmental movement's most cherished case. China's newly emerging social forces—commercial media, NGOs and the Internet—joined together with traditional indigenous people opposed to outside interest groups, showing what a vibrant thing a complete environmental campaign is. (J. Q. Liu, 2013b, p. 233)

Environmental protest was not confined to big dams. In the countryside, farmers protested about industrial discharge and water pollution that ruined their land and their crops. And in the early years of the 21st century, protest took hold in China's rapidly expanding cities.

The urban protests were different from the rural or the dam protests; they involved the relatively prosperous, urbanized, property-owning middle class, a sector that had benefited materially from China's rapid development. Despite this—or perhaps in defense of their recent gains—as China's urban environment deteriorated, a wave of protest began against further industrial development that the government quickly labeled NIMBY protests.

The first and in many ways most important of these was the protest in the pleasant and prosperous southern city of Xiamen in 2006 and 2007 against the construction of a huge paraxylene (PX) plant close to a residential district. The episode combined two of the three elements Liu Jianqiang had identified as necessary: strong local support and media coverage. It also included a third element: a perception of common cause between environmental protection officials and sympathetic journalists.

Paraxylene is an aromatic hydrocarbon and a commonly used chemical feedstock, important in paints and dyes, as an industrial solvent, and as a component of plastic and polyesters. In 2007, a Taiwanese corporation's plans to build a US\$1.4 billion addition to a chemical plant in Xiamen to produce PX provoked opposition that quickly spilled onto the streets. The story of the plant is a long and complex one: Originally approved in February 2004 without any public consultation, the proposed plant first ran into trouble in 2006 when Zhao Yufen, a chemistry professor and delegate to the CPPCC, wrote to the Xiamen Party secretary to express concerns about the project.<sup>1</sup> The city wanted to press ahead; Professor Zhao continued to resist.

In 2007, the liberal newspaper, *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, published Professor Zhao's concerns in an article that was reproduced on the important website Sohu.com. Further local coverage in print media was censored, but it was too late—the issue had gone live online.

In the beginning of June 2007, residents of Xiamen took to the streets to take part in protests against the plant that had been organized by text message. Officials in the EPA in Beijing saw an opportunity to call for a new environmental impact assessment. When it was completed, it recommended that the factory seek a new site. In the event, it moved farther along the coast.

The Xiamen affair was widely portrayed as a victory of the people over government and big business. In fact, many actors and interests were involved, including those of business rivals and of the sympathetic EPA officials who had seen the case as an opportunity to inject some rigor into China's shambolic environmental impact assessment procedures and to promote their own agenda of open public information and greater public participation. The relocated plant, however, remained troubled: An explosion during construction delayed its opening for a year, and on April 5, 2015, it was virtually destroyed by a massive explosion and fire (Q. Liu, 2015). More immediately, the success of the PX

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<sup>1</sup> For a full account of the complexities, see Ansfield (2013).



protests inspired a wave of similar action across the country wherever a PX plant was proposed. Protests against PX plants broke out in Zhangzhou, Dalian, Ningbo, Xianyang, Sichuan, Jiujiang, and Kunming, affecting a plant that was to be a key element of an oil refinery at the Chinese end of a new oil pipeline across Myanmar. In an effort to persuade the people of Kunming that they had nothing to fear, the mayor set up his own microblog and promised that if the majority of the people opposed the plant, it would not go ahead.

The protests posed a challenge to a government unused to being thwarted in its planning, and official impatience grew as resistance spread to other cherished projects, such as waste incinerators and coal-fired power stations—projects that officials saw as integral to China’s strategic long-term planning. Local officials, who did not want a failure to keep order on their record, were often inclined to give in to public opinion. In an attempt to gain control of the narrative and to guide public opinion into accepting the wisdom of the planners, the government organized a media campaign of reassurance on the safety of such plants that characterized the protests as either self-interested or “emotional” and “unscientific” (Peng & Gong, 2013).

But after the massive PX explosion in April 2015, which resulted in a fire that raged for more than 36 hours, public concerns about the safety standards of China’s chemical industry seemed less emotional and unscientific than the government had claimed. A day after the explosion, according to the website *China Digital Times*, which tracks government censorship directives, news outlets were instructed not to place news of the PX explosion in “lead story sections of news agency websites” and to “take note and control negative commentary related to petrochemical projects” (“Minitrue,” 2015, para. 2).

Since then, further catastrophes have undermined the public’s faith in China’s planners and the efficacy of environmental regulation and enforcement. In September 2015 in Tianjin, 173 people reportedly died and part of the city was destroyed in a huge explosion at a chemical warehouse that had been badly sited and poorly controlled (see “Tianjin Explosion,” 2015). Within a month, in addition to the Tianjin explosion, there were chemical plant explosions in Lishui, in Zhejiang Province (see Blanchard, 2015), Zibo in Shangong Province (see Gan, 2015), and, in November, at Fushun in Liaoning Province (see Durden, 2015).

### **The Digital Age**

In 1989, Dai Qing had to struggle to find a publisher willing to publish a physical book that criticized government policy. After her release from prison, when no formal outlet would publish her work, she took to the Internet. From Internet 1.0 in 2003, with its portal websites carrying huge quantities of information, to Internet 2.0 in 2008, which brought search engines, bulletin boards, and forums, and, by 2010, Internet 3.0, which launched the era of microblogging, the growth of the Internet in China was both rapid and game changing. It facilitated the rise of both citizen journalism and of new forms of information-based environmental activism.

The arrival of the digital age was to go a long way toward redressing the informational power imbalance. The government had a dilemma: It had recognized that the Internet was essential to a modern

economy and actively supported the development of the necessary infrastructure, but in fostering its growth, it also risked its own capacity to monopolize information. The Internet offered citizens a platform for environmental grievances and carried the risk, from the government's view, of stimulating activism and protest.

In 2004, the party's *Decision on Strengthening the Building of the Party's Leadership Capacity* declared that the party should

pay great attention to the influence the Internet and other newly emerging forms of media are having on public opinion . . . accelerate the building of a control mechanism comprising laws and regulations, administrative oversight, industry self-discipline and technology-based measures [and] strengthen the building of Internet propaganda teams, so that positive public opinion has the upper hand on the Internet. (CCP, 2004)

The party's response was twofold: In addition to negative censorship, it developed a proactive system of "public opinion guidance" through what has become known as the Fifty Cent Party, a name derived from the popular belief that they are paid 50 cents (in Chinese renminbi) for each progovernment post (Ford, 2015).

In March 2005, as the China Media Project reported, the city of Fuzhou was the first to set up a team of online news commentators, charged with actively disseminating the party's message and watching for untoward events on the Web (Bandurski, 2010). They joined the larger category of hired guns who censor content on the Internet and post party points of view or, as the party would put it,

using accurate theoretical frameworks and objective and positive information to redress [errors] and channel [public opinion]. Experience has shown that such teams can effectively ensure the correct guidance of online public opinion, and help the masses of Web users rationally discriminate information in the online public opinion sphere. (Bandurski, 2010, para. 27)

By the end of 2011, more than 70% of China's half a billion Internet users said they used the Internet to get their news (Hadland, 2015). Twitter is blocked in China, but Chinese netizens use Chinese microblogs (*weibo*) to post text, photographs, and video, benefiting from the fact that 140 Chinese characters can say far more than 140 characters in an alphabetic language. Despite growing restrictions, microblogging still allows millions of Chinese to have a voice and to receive unofficial news and commentary. It also allowed new forms of journalism to emerge.

The new media gave the Chinese public the power to scrutinize officials and criticize the government: Many officials were caught wearing luxury watches, driving expensive cars, or otherwise living beyond their salaries. Professional journalists, too, found digital outlets for stories they could not publish in official media and began to collaborate with one another in investigations, publishing reports that circulated rapidly in cyberspace.

The party was slow to appreciate that these developments would require new ways of responding. It was also faced with a dilemma over how to compete with the more popular perspectives found on the Internet: It could open up information and compete with unofficial news providers for the trust of China's netizens, or it could seek to restrict the freedoms of the Chinese Internet, suppressing news and information where it judged it necessary, to shield itself from criticism or to kill off incipient protest.

By 2008, it was clear that the CCP was not willing to relinquish information control. David Bandurski of the China Media Project reported a more proactive strategy of "public opinion channelling" that had been fleshed out in an article in *Red Flag*, the party's fortnightly theoretical journal (Bandurski, 2013b). The author, Ren Xianliang, is a theoretician of media control who was also vice chairman of the All-China Journalists Association and acting vice-minister of Shaanxi Province's propaganda department and the author of *The Guiding Art of Public Opinion* (2010), in which he argued that the digital age demanded a new approach.

Ren points to the gap between official media and the Internet and the emergence of Weibo users with hundreds of millions of followers (the so-called Big Vs). He saw this as a challenge to the basic principle that the party should dominate the media and one that risked damaging the credibility of the government and party rule. The party, he argued, urgently needed to regain control.

He accused Internet users of "spreading rumors" and "misleading people," actions he defined as "Internet crimes." The so-called Big Vs—microbloggers with verified accounts with large numbers of followers—he accused of "manipulat[ing] sensitive incidents, maliciously attacking the current system, blaming and blackening the name of the Party and the government, in some cases even inciting the subversion of the Party's leadership and its political rule"

A crackdown on the Chinese Internet had begun. In 2011, the government announced new rules that mandated real name registration on social media, and the following year for all Internet users. In 2013, new rules criminalized the online publication of "rumors" with draconian punishments, including jail terms, if posts that the party deemed objectionable or "threatened national security, reputation or interests" were forwarded more than 500 times. The Weibo accounts of prominent government critics were closed. Several high-profile arrests followed, of people as diverse as a 15-year-old schoolboy and a rich businessman and Big V, Charles Xue, who was charged with soliciting prostitutes and paraded on television in handcuffs.

The crackdown had a profound impact on Weibo: In 2014, some 56 million people stopped using their accounts as users switched to a new platform, Weixin (WeChat), which operates on an invitation-only basis. WeChat remained relatively less controlled, but it is not possible to build followings of many millions in the same way.

The government, however, demonstrates some ambivalence in its response: There is a greater awareness that obstructive tactics may not succeed in the new media age and that government officials must learn a different style of governing, taking online interactions more seriously and learning how to respond with Internet users. It has proven difficult, nevertheless, to change old attitudes, and officials

frequently characterize environmental protests as “emotional” and ill-informed, in contrast to the “rational” and “scientific” approach of the party and its planners.

**The Triangular Relationship:  
Journalism, Civil Society, and Access to Information**

Just as journalists played a key role in promoting environmental awareness in China, acting not only as channels of information but as activists in promoting environmental protection, they also helped to drive two related trends in the early years of the 21st century—demands for access to information and for greater consultation and participation in environmental decision making.

It was a journalist, Liu Detian, who founded China’s first strictly environmental NGO in China. It was a small affair, set up in 1991 in Panjin City in Liaoning Province, and it was dedicated to the protection of black-beaked gulls (Boyd, 2013). As noted, journalists were to continue to play a key role in environmental protection over the next two decades. People such as Ma Jun, one of the veterans of the Tiger Leaping Gorge dam campaign, went on to found the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs; Wang Yongchen, the key antidam campaigner, founded the NGO Green Earth Volunteers; journalists Liu Jianqiang, who later served as the China editor of *chinadialogue.net* and Feng Yongfeng, who set up the environmental education organization Green Beagle, pioneered environmental coverage with the aim of mobilizing and educating China’s citizens in the importance of environmental protection.

Environmental civil society organizations in China also suffered from ambivalent government attitudes; while the government acknowledged that they were necessary, it distinguished between organizations that delivered services under contract to the state and those that criticized and mobilized. The latter category was regarded with suspicion and growing official hostility. For many years, environmental activism occupied an uncertain middle ground, encouraged by some sectors of government (as in the cases of Tiger Leaping Gorge and the Xiamen protests), but regarded with suspicion by other sectors of the state who feared the potential of environmental protest to promote wider antigovernment sentiment.

Some of China’s rapidly proliferating environmental volunteer and social organizations conducted traditional socialist-style mobilization—mass tree-planting days, for instance—which were encouraged by the government; other activities, which might involve opposition to industrial projects or major infrastructure developments, exposing wrongdoing or polluting behavior, or illuminating the gap between policy and practice, found less favor.

The State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), elevated in 2008 to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), was one of the government entities that tacitly supported both environmental NGOs and environmental journalism in these years. Weak and underfunded as a central government agency, it struggled to stem the tide of pollution that accompanied China’s industrial revolution. Its task was rendered more difficult by the structure of the organization: Local environmental protection bureaus, nominally under the authority of the central agency, operated in practice under the control of local governments, which were often complicit in the pollution that the bureaus were tasked with controlling. They were, therefore, structurally unable to enforce regulations effectively on the ground.

Faced with these overwhelming obstacles, agency officials sought alliances in media and China's burgeoning environmental movement in the hope of raising their own capacity to act against polluters and to encourage a groundswell of opinion that might persuade higher authorities to take a more robust line against violators. Where they planned to act against powerful polluters, officials in SEPA were careful to recruit media support. In 1997 and 1998, for example, SEPA conducted a campaign to crack down on polluting companies along the Huai River and coordinated with dozens of media outlets to publish special reports. A number of polluters were successfully shut down, although the toxic aftermath remained (see Li, 2013). In pursuit of this strategy, SEPA/MEP played a key role in advancing access to official information and opening up data to public scrutiny.

The party-state was facing increasing demands from its citizens in the interrelated areas of access to information and greater participation in environmental decision making. The two are intertwined: Information enables participation; participation can add to the information available to policy makers and enhance the quality of policy outcomes. In effective participation, communication is at least a two-way process—from policy makers to public and vice versa, with the further dimension of new media's horizontal and networked communications, which impact and shape public opinion and attitudes.

#### **Principle 10**

The 1992 Rio summit, in which China participated, formulated the foundations of the approach to environmental information. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration stressed the significance of three interconnected factors for sustainable development: access to information, access to decision making, and access to justice or redress. Principle 10 states:

Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous material and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided. (UNEP, 1992, para. 10)

Eighteen years after the Rio outcome document, UNEP's governing council agreed to the *Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*, known as the Bali Guidelines, which set out the responsibilities of government to collect and publish data, to make other information available on request, and to take responsibility for building public awareness and capacity. Subsequently, a number of governments established information and participation norms in environmental governance. Today, the most substantial and comprehensive initiatives are the Aarhus Convention of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the information policy of the European Union's European Environment Agency.

The outcome document of the 2012 Rio+20 summit, *The Future We Want*, reiterated that “broad public participation and access to information and judicial and administrative proceedings are essential to the promotion of sustainable development.” In China, too, the government was pondering a more open information regime. In 2008, after a period of policy experimentation, including local-level pilots and several years of research by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the government introduced *Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Open Government Information*. The initiative was particularly welcomed in the newly formed Ministry of Environmental Protection, where some key officials believed that greater transparency could help their weak and understaffed ministry become more effective. More open information might allow local people and media to keep tabs on local pollution and corruption, and in the hands of China’s grassroots environmentalists, it could become a powerful tool to hold polluters to account.

By the time the Chinese government introduced its regulations, there was a considerable body of international experience on environmental information and participation regimes, most of them based on the Rio Declaration and subsequent conventions.

The underlying argument of Principle 10 was that better-informed stakeholders may contribute positively to policy-making processes, and so lead to better policy outcomes. In the Chinese context, there was also the negative factor that denying citizens information and opportunities to participate often led to late-stage street protest and the kind of social disorder that the government was anxious to avoid. In practice, however, bureaucratic resistance to open environmental information in China remained strong.

The Aarhus Convention treats information as a right and allows only narrow grounds for a government to refuse to respond to requests. Information provided proactively under the convention includes material aimed at influencing public opinion; material that is directly associated with policy processes; and more extensive material and data sets that interested parties may use for their own activities.

In Europe, for instance, a wide range of environmental information is available, with a presumption in favor of publication, either proactively or in response to requests, to enable citizens to understand environmental issues and to challenge government, businesses, and other interests effectively.

Public confidence that the information is reliable and relevant is important, since unreliable information encourages alternative information sources. In China, however, the approach reflected the ambivalence already noted in official attitudes to media and communication and the desire to harvest some of the benefits of more open information—which include fewer public protests—without suffering negative consequences.

Article 1 of China’s new regulations clearly stated that the purpose of the regulations was to

ensure that citizens, legal persons and other organisations obtain government information in accordance with the law, enhance transparency of the work of government, promote administration in accordance with the law, and bring into full play

the role of government information in serving the people's production and livelihood and their economic and social activities. (China State Council, 2007, para. 1)

The regulations followed the Rio and Aarhus guidelines in distinguishing between open government information—information that should be proactively disseminated by government agencies at various levels—and information that should be disclosed in response to requests. They provided for a time limit of 15 to 30 days for a government response.

They also set out the exemptions to the public right to know. These included information that could "endanger state security, public security, economic security and social stability," a provision that allows China's vague catch-all laws on state secrets to trump disclosure.

Despite the constraints, the Ministry of Environmental Protection championed disclosure and moved swiftly to enact the State Council regulations through its own Environmental Information Disclosure Decree. This required "major industrial polluters" to disclose and report emissions data within 30 days of a request and set out guidelines for the proactive disclosure of 17 types of environmental information.

Many provincial and municipal authorities went on to set up websites on which they make available, for example, data on air and water quality. Public concern about deteriorating air quality in China's major cities was an important driver: The discrepancy between official "blue sky day" counts and lived experience, supported by the U.S. embassy air-sampling Twitter feed, greatly increased pressure for the release of full, undoctored air-quality information, to include data on the smallest particles, PM2.5, which government agencies routinely collected, but did not disclose (see Andrews, 2011). Some authorities now release real-time information, which minimizes the opportunity for official cheating.

### **The Limits of Environmental Journalism**

Many forms of environmental information are now widely available in China and are used to inform public education and campaigns aimed at behavior change. Since environmental protection is now official government policy and part of the economic and social development strategy, certain types of environmental information have become officially sanctioned media content.

Coverage in official and independent media has greatly increased: Newspapers, radio stations, and television channels often carry environmental reports, as do China Central TV and local provincial stations. The *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Economic Daily* carry environmental news columns and sections, and scheduled television programs on environmental protection include China Central TV's *Green Space*, China Educational TV's *Environmental Focus*, Shandong TV's *Homeland*, Hebei TV's *Green Homeland*, Hubei TV's *Lucky Global Village*, Beijing TV's *Green Economics*, Jiangsu TV's *Green Report*, and Phoenix TV's *Our Shared Planet*.

Although never free of government concern, environmental protest has been tolerated to a greater degree than actions judged to pose a political challenge to state authority. In more recent times, however, as the environmental crisis has grown more acute and suspicion of foreign funding and

assistance to Chinese NGOs has been more clearly articulated at official levels, the space has begun to narrow for environmental activity as well as for other forms of civic action. Environmental protests are now often characterized as dangerous because they lead to "disorder." The motives of those who take part have been questioned, sometimes characterized as selfish and antisocial, sometimes as serving private interests, and the fate of China's most celebrated environmental documentary suggests that official encouragement of investigative environmental reporting has notably diminished.

In March 2015, shortly before the annual meeting of the National People's Congress was due to open, a former CCTV journalist, Chai Jing, released a documentary on air pollution on the Internet. The documentary, entitled *Under the Dome*, was cogently argued, setting out the science of air pollution, pointing to the abject failure of implementation of China's laws and regulations, and assigning a large measure of blame to the state-owned oil industry and other powerful interests (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6X2uwlQGQM>). The documentary appeared to have a degree of official backing: Several officials from the Ministry of Environmental Protection gave interviews, and the *People's Daily* marked the release with an interview with Chai Jing.

The film became an Internet sensation: 200 million people viewed it within four days of its release. Five days after it first appeared, it was taken down and further references to it were scrubbed from the formal media and the Internet. The episode is intriguing for the glimpse it afforded of the continuing power struggles around China's environment: It seems likely that the Ministry of Environmental Protection encouraged the making of the documentary to stress the ministry's need for more power and resources to implement antipollution laws and regulations. It is a tactic that ministry officials have used before.

Chen Jining, the newly appointed environmental protection minister, told reporters at China News Service that he sent Chai a text message to thank her for focusing attention on environmental problems. The documentary also called for greater transparency and public participation, which have long been argued for by the ministry. How well the documentary achieved its objectives remains to be seen, but in its short life on the Chinese Internet, *Under the Dome* became a landmark event. Its popularity, however, appears to have posed an unacceptable risk.

### **Conclusion**

Environmental journalism in China has grown in scope and sophistication in the last 20 years, alongside the growth in environmental activism, the greater opportunities afforded by the Internet, and a more open official media. The quality of professional environmental journalism has risen, and the range of voices has greatly expanded through the growth of Internet-based citizen journalism.

There have been important gains in the right to know and in access to environmental information, though China's environmental journalists still encounter difficulties in cultivating relationships with scientists and in gaining access to scientific data, and they rarely use freedom-of-information requests to force disclosure.



Today the government has adopted sustainable development as official policy and promotes the slogan of "ecological civilization" as its ambition for China. However, despite these gains and China's deepening environmental crisis, the space for both environmental NGOs and independent environmental journalism has been constricted since 2008 by a party concerned to suppress challenges to its monopoly of power and anxious to maintain "stability." Today the opportunities afforded by the relative opening of the early years of the 21st century are once again in retreat. As long as these conditions prevail, environmental journalism in China will continue to challenge the government narrative, but it will be unable to make a full contribution to the resolution of China's environmental crisis.

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