

## **China’s Green Public Culture: Network Pragmatics and the Environment**

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The rates of environmental degradation and climate change accelerate and challenge taken-for-granted practices of living across the planet. China’s recent “smogpocalypse” illustrates how disruptive ecoevents necessitate complex, urgent alternatives and exchange. In this essay, we propose and analyze China’s Green Public Culture in terms of its players, networks, media, action, strategy, discourses, and cultural norm. The divergent communication activities of 21st-century green public culture in China are assembled as network pragmatics that cultivate experience, connect practices, tie alliances, express differences, and circulate controversy. Thus, we identify distinctive, emerging networks of cooperation and contestation, the vectors of dissensus that bid to generate and shape resources requisite for living in the Anthropocene.

*Keywords: public culture, environmentalism, China, network pragmatics, dissensus, Anthropocene*

### **The Environment and the Anthropocene**

In 2000, Nobel Prize–winning scientist Paul Crutzen named the current era as the Anthropocene, a time when “humans are becoming the dominant force for change on earth” (Crutzen & Schwägerl, 2011, para. 2). The Earth System Governance Project (Biermann et al., 2012) concludes that changing course and steering away from tipping points that “might lead to rapid and irreversible change . . . [and] fundamental reorientation and restructuring of national and international institutions toward more effective Earth system governance and planetary stewardship are necessary” (p. 1306). Such a turn hinges on a breakthrough of similar scope and magnitude in the study of communication: the marshaling of networked cultural resources engaged to address and contest environmental change. Forms of life are

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put in jeopardy by accelerating, human-induced, material alterations of habitats and biomes. In this study, green public culture in China is introduced as network pragmatics that feature an innovative mix of communication and resources for living.

Communicative labor addresses "nature" across local and regional sites; such work grounds common modes of living on the planet as well as introduces heterogeneous, sometimes contested alternatives. Efforts to repair the environment, secure sustainability, and affect resilience in the face of climate change remain vulnerable and slow to develop. Indeed, less than a decade ago, we wrote that China and the United States faced an environmental crisis (Liu & Goodnight, 2008). Ecological address sometimes takes surprising turns, however. Notably, in 2014, the United States and China joined in "common cause" to curb carbon emissions. President Obama promised that "the United States would emit 26 to 28 percent less carbon in 2025 than it did in 2005," and President Xi Jinping pledged "to reach peak carbon emissions by 2030" (Landler, 2014, para. 8). In Hangzhou the following September, the presidents advanced the Paris accords and announced a "joint plan to reduce greenhouse gases" (Landler & Perlez, 2016, para. 3). Such announcements could be dismissed as "green speak" given the deep dependency of both nations on carbon culture. In this article, we argue that China is developing fresh, distinctive resources for environmental actions. We illustrate this claim with a recent example and then present network pragmatics to identify an emergent public culture.

### **China's Smog Event**

Without remediation, industrial waste grows. Climate change adds to environmental problems. The mix produces events that alter conventional expectations by exceeding historic experience of dangerous conditions. Dirty-air days startle publics and compel explanation; yet, they defy articulation. Like the global North, China committed to economic development before putting environmental protections in place. The 21st century has rendered urban living increasingly hazardous. National environmental protection laws have been passed belatedly. Rapid industrial growth and lack of local enforcement intensify smog, nevertheless. Temperature inversions trap urban populations. Public responses assemble.

In 2011, the Beijing-based Daerwen Nature Quest Agency and several other provincial nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) initiated the "I Monitor the Air for My Country" campaign. They called for volunteer citizens to keep a daily air quality log and track safety. These efforts pressured the central government to release official particulate matter (PM) 2.5 data daily (Xu, 2014). Unable to ignore urban experiences, officials spoke out: "This pollution is leading to much public worry," party leader Liu Jigang observed of the heavy smog in urban districts (Freifelder, 2014, para. 6). Flights were cancelled on gloomy days, increases in lung cancer rates were noted, and controversy over measurement accuracy flourished. "Is Beijing's smog getting worse?" the press asked (Bristow, 2011). "Smogpocalypse" is here, China's headlines read in 2013 (Lobello, 2013). True, the press pictured dirty air, even while passing along optimistic public policy pronouncements. Stories featured pictures of city landscapes, iconic monuments, and masked citizens, all shrouded in white. To these front-page images was added health threat information depicting day-by-day the floating hazards (Lobello, 2013).

China's national and local environmental agencies responded. Smog monitors were set up by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) in 2012. In 2014, the director of the National Development and Reform Commission's health program spoke of the spread of these measuring initiatives as a "watershed moment" that would help local officials and citizens "to target their concerns and focus attention on the big problems" (Freifelder, 2014, para. 2). New local commitments followed as city governments acted. For instance, *China Daily* headlined an effort by Shanghai in 2015 to cut PM 2.5 by 20% from the level in 2013, with an investment of 100 billion Yuan in environmental protection (Wang, 2015). A daily PM 2.5 index was provided to the public to inform choices for outdoor activity. Some wore masks publically as personal protection. Intended as safety measures, data and masks fused to signal and pace environmental stress. To address air quality, China adapted a cap-and-trade policy, with cost incentives different from its European counterparts (E. Ng, 2013). Neoliberal cap-and-trade efforts to fight pollution are subject to gaming and price manipulation and therefore remain controversial in the West. It is unclear whether China's efforts will succeed (Galbraith, 2015). In Beijing, however, it was reported that the amount of sulfur dioxide and nitric oxide in the air declined from 7% to 4% over 2014 (Landler, 2014).

Since the 1990s, scattered environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) took to the Internet to articulate concern for specific environmental problems. Presently, Web images and video displays announce ecoevents frequently ahead of press coverage and state responses. In March 2015, air quality urgencies were publicized dramatically by *Under the Dome*, an independent documentary that identified the causes and dangers of smog in China. The producer, Chai Jing, was a former state news anchor, hostess, and advocate of 5Km Green Commuting in Beijing. She spoke sharply in TED-talk fashion on air pollution. Her moving personal account spoke of fear and directed blame toward industrial polluters. Videos of the documentary were posted on Weibo, Youku, Tencent, and even YouTube quickly. Millions watched online (Chyan, 2015). The high-quality video produced a sophisticated blend of personal testimony with scary visual scenes. The "talk" was timed fortuitously with China's two key meetings of the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Could it have been a government trial balloon? The film "may not be independent" was as far as the speculation went (Chyan, 2015). Professors, scientists, and experts "discussed the validity of Ms. Chai's arguments, the relationship between business practices and pollution and government oversight of air quality issues" (Fong, 2015, para. 3). Debates followed. At a press conference, Premier Li Keqiang vowed publically that the government would do more to enforce laws (Mufson, 2015).

Party actions have been on the rise. Although China faces serious challenges on environmental protection, it has also announced that it will not repeat the Western "treatment after pollution" path. The commitment of the 2012 18th National Congress of the Communist Party was republicized in 2015: "the country seeks to achieve significant progress in the construction of an ecological civilization that features the sustainable use of resources and an environmentally friendly society" (Y. Chen, 2015, para. 4). Citizens and ENGOS are now accorded legal rights to sue polluters. In March 2015, a chemical polluter in Shandong province was brought to court by an NGO filing for the interests of Dezhou City, and, in July, ENGO Friends of Nature (FON) sued the Beijing Changping district for damaging a 200-acre wetland. Legal intervention is not as common as in the United States. *Under the Dome* readied the country culturally, however, for an ambitious government effort, although the video itself was taken down quickly.

Controversies multiply and stretch the venues of public culture. The liberal *South China Morning Post* questioned what really was at issue with the video, quoting blogger Ran Yunfei, who observed, "A government that has unrestricted power is the biggest pollutant of society. We are not getting to the crux of the issue if we do not see this problem" (T. Ng, 2015, para. 10). The paper quoted that economist Wen Kejian, who wrote the film, "called for courage to continue investigating the problem." "It's like peeling an onion, and the truth may be scary when the inner layer is exposed," he argued metaphorically (T. Ng, 2015, para. 11). Thus, the film stretched antagonism across institutions to address, indirectly, the state.

### **Green Public Culture and Network Pragmatics**

In 2011–2015, smog-day attacks in China drew attention from experts, motivated central and local governments to act, entangled the press in mixed-media coverage, pushed citizens and ENGOs to adopt digital tools for monitoring daily life, and eventually found their way into statements of national and international commitments. Smog prompted environmental discussions, argument trajectories, and public actions of high officials and urban residents. The complex movement offers but the latest illustration of a nest of activities in China emerging at least over the past decade.

In its own style, China's environmental movement has grown vigorously from small scale in the 1990s to the broad-based, complex activities of a green public culture (GPC). M. Chen (2014) commented,

It's picked up support from everyday citizens, from middle-class parents worried about their children's asthma to frustrated fishermen whose catches have been lost to riverbed contamination. As wealth levels have risen, so has public disgust with the by-products of explosive industrial development. Thousands of groups have rallied around environmental health, conservation and energy issues, and a fresh crop of activists—some affiliated with formal organizations, others simply concerned about continuing to breathe—are channeling that consciousness through social media and grassroots protest campaigns. In doing so, they are pushing the boundaries of permissible dissent and winning incremental victories. (para. 3)

The smog events demonstrate the communication complexity that calls into being China's growing GPC, a harmonious arrangement of disagreement, antagonism, and dissensus (Rancière, 1999, 2010; Willard, 1989) that, we argue, captures the dynamic communications of cooperation and contestation across *pragma*<sup>3</sup>, places, people, institutions, and ecologies. Dissensus challenges calculated balances of costs and benefits by assembling *pragma* or facts that express differences, disrupt conventions, and field imagined alternatives. Spurred by disruptive events, dissensual environmentalism prompts new assessments, novel plans, and initiative cascades. These mixed outcomes network agents and agencies that imagine multiple, sometimes incompatible goals such as immediate relief, durable adjustment, long-term adaptation, and smart resilience. GPC furnishes generative contexts for discoveries and reactions, monitoring and enforcement, speculation and goal-setting, cooperation and contestation. The very complexity of the events, activities, and ingenious connections assemble into the dispersive and

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<sup>3</sup> *Pragma* is a particular, active object entangled in an ecology.

integrative flows of China's GPC. In it, ENGOs, government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), and international NGOs (INGOs) initiate, maintain, and abandon relationships with one another, various agencies of the state, and diverse populations at the grassroots, institutional, party, and transnational levels.

Historians observed the uniqueness of China's NGO sectors, even before the Communist Party. Then and now, what is held to distinguish Chinese civil society from its Western counterparts is the unconventional relationship of the state to civic activities. Q. Ma (2002) suggests that the purpose of "early Chinese civil society was not to confront the government, but rather to harmonize the relations between society and the government, providing autonomy to assist government" (p. 115). Wakeman (1993) holds that Chinese citizens conceive of "social existence mainly in terms of obligation and interdependence rather than rights and responsibilities" (p. 134). Similarly, Ho (2007) argues that whereas in the West political rights are deployed by individual citizens to protest against the state, in China duties are maneuvered into line when the state and social organizations cooperate to "protect citizens' rights or counterbalance state power" (p. 192). Civil society structures are presumptively different from Western models based on liberties, freedoms, and individual rights.

Typically, Western environmental efforts are framed as either (1) the civil society discourse of a public sphere or (2) a social movement process that raises awareness through mobilization and confrontation. China's green movement has been studied using similar models. Recently, scholars have expressed discomfort with using Western models. Critics have been successful in identifying indigenous aspects of China's situation, but most have not suggested a distinguishing model (Gu, 2008; Han, 2014; Mol, 2006; Sima, 2011; Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). China's environmental communication has its own unique configurations and challenges, however. Carter and Mol (2006) assert that these consist of

inadequate environmental capacities of state and economic organizations; instability in the relations between central and lower levels of government; an active citizenry that increasingly holds officials responsible and accountable, local and national media reporting which is becoming more independent . . . and the increasing integration of China into international and global networks. (p. 331)

In 2008, we proposed that China's environmentalism is best understood within the rubric of GPC (Liu & Goodnight, 2008). Contrary to Yang and Calhoun (2007), Sima (2011), and Gu (2008), we do not think that China's environmentalism constitutes an incipient public sphere, much less one that follows bourgeois history outlined by Jürgen Habermas. Rather, China's green movement features a hybrid model (Bhabha, 1994) that draws on a social imaginary (Anderson, 1991; Castoriadis, 1998; Taylor, 2002) within the ambit of the mixed postempire, post-Maoist legacies of the material social state.

We follow Catriona Sandilands (2002), who took the leads of Hannah Arendt, Dana Villa, and David Torgerson into ecological inquiry. Sandilands challenges the limits of industrial practices through a call for attention to critical, public communicative performances of nature. For her, a GPC is "a realm in which the world can appear and be made meaningful in light of the opinions of multiple others thinking, reflecting, and imagining in each other's company" (p. 129). Echoing Taylor and Bhabha, Sandilands proposes the notion of "green public culture." She calls for more renewed, inclusive green political

changes, in which a much wider range of knowledge and opinions, as well as the approaches that humans practice to engage nature in each other's complex relationships, should be appreciated. This shapes the space for our conceptualization of GPC in China.

In this essay, we extend Sandilands's GPC by developing network pragmatics, an outlook that identifies relations among agents (actors), agencies (private, state, mixed, and grassroots), and operations (circulation and dissemination of materials, objects, experiences, and affect) across China. Network pragmatics refer to those communicative activities that connect words and deeds, describe and publicize facts, train and reflect on objects, make and do activities in blended public and personal places—at various scales and different speeds of circulation. Dissensus enters network pragmatics when facts are experienced as *pragma of things*, objects that act and spread into connected communicative gambits for coupling or disassociating relationships. Dissensus appears as diverse acts of disagreement, contestation, and antagonism. Network pragmatics focus on communication as changing—tentatively evolving—equipment for living in the Anthropocene. China is a hyperlocus of network pragmatics that draw on the heritage of the past, confront the vicissitudes of the present, and turn toward thriving in the Anthropocene. Thus, we identify and conduct inquiry into the novel, emergent fusions of China's maturing GPC.

### **China's Green Public Culture**

GPC is an ensemble of communicative activities that come to exist in the push and pull of local, national, and international networks affecting material conditions and biocologies. Such activities foster network pragmatics that function as ties connecting humans, nonhuman actors, and apparatus into productive work of a culture scaled at different levels. We hope to introduce and illustrate GPC as an emergent, complex array of cultural spaces that continues to grow and invites ever-more inquiry. Next, we map the terrains of China's GPC by identifying ongoing ties and relations among players, connections, media, actions, discourses, institutional relations, and cultural norms. These elements fuse into network pragmatics, we argue, that are still being worked with, on, and out among a host of international, state, mixed group, and grassroots agencies. The study does not include a review of the unique historical and social factors influencing the matrixes of green culture.

#### ***Key Players—GPC Threads Diverse Urban and Rural Agents and Agencies by Identifying Material Problems and Practical Topics; Embedded Activists Unite in a Common Cause***

China transformed from a traditional culture to a modern, mixed agricultural and industrial economy. Population and economic pressures converged with shocking costs. Environmental issues vary. Topically, they include material questions of extraction, preservation, biodiversity, and risk, as well as ecological repair, renewal, and preservation. Endangered species initiated NGO causes. Water safety followed. Industrial and air pollution now raise wide concern. As in the West, problems are associated with agricultural runoff, coal-fired power generators, and the chemical byproducts of industries. In short supply to being with, "[a]bout 60 percent of the groundwater beneath Chinese cities is described as 'severely polluted'" (Lallanilla, 2013, para. 13). Unsafe air and water spark activities and protests and make news. Desertification is made worse by aggressive farming and deforestation. Certain places become symbols

that transmit public shame, such as "Cancer Villages." A self-published map of Cancer Villages by Deng Fei demonstrates chilling reality with numbers of places at risk (Deng, 2010). Although Beijing smog stands out, bad air extends into Shanghai, Urumqi, Lanzhou, and Linfen in the west (Lallanilla, 2013). Decreasing blue skies and limited visibility day-by-day draw increasing public attention and efforts to protect.

Diverse agents in the GPC include grassroots ENGOs and GONGOs as the major forces, state and local agencies with growing administrative and policy involvement and development, INGOs and international organizations (IOs) that extend green networks internationally; increased media reporting on facts and causes; and citizens showing more open awareness and action (sometimes direct). Agents engage in discussions and actions that draw on and invent topics that locate material problems, identify concerns, and conjecture possible actions.

Yang and Calhoun (2007) describe China's environmentalism as a fledgling "green public sphere." Generally, however, scholars observe little clear presence of a unified, movement-like, publicity-oriented front of contestation in China (Johnson, 2010; Tang & Zhan, 2008; Tong, 2005). ENGOs appear to adopt neither social movement confrontation nor public sphere debate strategies. The "I Monitor the Air for My Country" PM 2.5 campaign offers a recent example of citizen and ENGO collaboration that employs scientific measurement to raise open awareness (Xu, 2014). Unlike in the West, Elizabeth Economy observes, "China's protests rarely have external coordination from green NGOs"; rather, as experts observe, some NGOs have begun to use the protest momentum "to push for regulatory and legal reforms that will improve environmental protections" (Gilbert, 2012, para. 5). The connections among problems, actions, and politics remain complex, changing, and transient; positions are implied or suggested. Agents affiliate in a common cause rather than ground positions in critical-rational discourses characterizing a public sphere. ENGOs usually connect through topics developed with fact-based materials. Any Chinese ENGO must balance the causes it takes up against the chances the state may expand its controls for its own reasons. The press faces similar constraints. Journalists do report on a range of environmental issues now, but meanwhile they must work within the interests of legitimating the state.

State efforts expand from time to time to support active NGO participation, usually when their goals are not contradictory. ENGOs try all means to make the best of such opportunities. The successful Old Summer Palace anti-seepage campaign in 2005, for example, raised controversies in Beijing over the planned redo of the Imperial Garden's lake surface. The State Environmental Protection Administration and National People's Congress set the precedent of holding public hearings in such matters with the issuance of the "Environmental Protection Administrative Permission Hearing Regulation Trial" (J. Ma, Webber, & Finlayson, 2009; Moore & Warren, 2006). In the decade-long Nu River campaign, early dam opposition strategies shifted to gain access to state planning. Thus, NGOs leveraged local unrest into a path for consultative influence in state planning. NGO access was later permitted more widely by the state. The state does have strict environmental regulations and keeps improving them. Local-level enforcement efforts bring frustration (Mufson, 2015): Once state policy is established, of course, the costs of asking for change and mobilizing opposition go up.

China's green movement persists through the tug and pull of constraints and possibilities defined by a mixture of policy planning, market forces, local government, and central party influence. Ho (2007)

argues that China's political setup is a semi-authoritarian environment, which "is restrictive, but paradoxically, it is also conducive to nationwide, voluntary collective action with less risk of social instability and repression by the governing elite" (p. 188). Such a contradictory duality forms the heart of "embedded social activism" in China, where social spaces for civic action accommodate continuous negotiation and adaptation, as well as incremental political change. The ENGOs "have promoted a more active public life and started to change the way Chinese citizens approach the state" (Tong, 2005, p. 185). Thus, China may have a "thin" public sphere, yet it exhibits increasingly diverse and rich cultural spaces.

***Networks—GPC Is Mobilized by Networks Across National and Local Government and Nongovernmental Agents and Agencies***

We map the dynamic qualities of GPC in modeling communication along network lines—the "mesh" of actors, agencies, and actants (Latour, 1987, 2005) allied and at odds in different places and at varied times. Grassroots ENGOs form the core of the activism networks in green cultural spaces. Using Guangdong and Guangxi provinces as examples, Wu (2013) shows how China's environmental activism comes together through "an amalgamation of grassroots initiatives essentially led by environmental NGOs, which has gradually taken root in provincial and local politics" (p. 103) rather than as a homogeneous phenomenon. Many local ENGOs not only knit strong local green networks, they also motivate participants to spread out, connect with others, and form broad, sometimes national alliances. The connections come to life through information sharing, topic-generated discussions, and campaign-specific ad hoc affiliations.

The Chinese state restricts the size and standing of horizontal NGO networks. NGOs are not capable of large-scale direct action; rather, their energies are directed primarily across vertical networks. NGOs craft alliances with state-funded GONGOs such as the All China Women's Federation (Han, 2014). Sometimes, ENGOs operate diagonally, cutting across to make the best of information connections with higher ranking officials. This way, they substitute formal institutionalized alliances with informal network exchange, thereby diffusing power (Han, 2014). Reflecting on a series of oppositional movements to hydropower projects on the Nu and mid-JinSha Rivers and the Xiaonanhai Dam, Han records how ENGOs and other nonstate actors (including journalists, activists, INGOs, and UNESCO) formed into loose alliances, finding common cause. Relationships were based on shared beliefs that policy should protect the river. Such networking not only attracted many social agencies and accorded space for diverse voices, but more importantly, it exhibited "qualitative" improvement as the collective activism is now more driven by achieving common policy goals (Han, 2013).

China's ENGOs frequently deploy networking strategies to entangle environmentally aware cultural agents and agencies into campaigns. For instance, ENGOs proactively developed and relied on the China Rivers Network made up of key ENGOs such as FON and Global Village Beijing, individual scientists, academics, journalists, and the Green Journalist Salon. The network agencies exchanged information and ideas, coordinated activities, and mobilized resources throughout their long-term antidam Nu River campaigns against rampant development since 2003 (Han, 2014). Such networking generates advocacy. In a detailed study of 19 environmental campaigns initiated by Chinese ENGOs, Liu (2011) found that several campaigns achieved impressive policy change (such as the Nu River campaign). These flourished by virtue of creating large physical or virtual alliance networks with more than 50 organizations.

China's GONGOs are no strangers to environmental networking. With unique leverage, these government-sponsored agencies compose a special part of green networks. GONGOs function as unseen "magic brokers" that connect different types of agencies at multiple levels of exposure. They are influential partners, second only to governmental agencies, in forming intranational and sometimes transnational environmental partnerships. They often serve as a platform for interactions between grassroots NGOs and political authorities (Xie, 2011). The transformative GONGO network space offers places to test possible bonds among government agencies and grassroots initiatives. The All-China Environment Federation furnishes an example. Approved by the State Council and managed under China's Environmental Protection Division, the All-China Environment Federation's strong resource base includes high-ranking officials and top environmental experts, as well as support from mainstream media and governmental departments. Over the years, it has organized many large-scale conferences, events, and projects that connected the government and various parties in society. For instance, since 2006, it has held an "Annual Meeting of China Environmental Civil Society Organizations on Sustainable Development" connecting hundreds of ENGOs, leaders from the State Council, National People's Congress, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, MEP, IOs, and media to share information and explore cooperation potentials. In addition, it held several environmental law training workshops connecting highly trained attorneys, scholars, and government agencies with local lawyers. Partnering with the United Nations Environment Planning Department, it held major events such as the project on "Protecting the Environmental Rights and Justice of the Public" to build a transnational network with the Chinese public.<sup>4</sup>

GPC entangles local, regional, and national resources, problems, and opportunities. IOs intervene either directly with state support or less directly by contributing money, equipment, and expertise to diverse grassroots initiatives. INGOs extend domestic environmental networks to a broader global green community (Han, 2013). Among active INGOs are the World Wide Fund for Nature, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, and The Mountain Institute. J. Chen (2010) argues that environmental protection demonstrates "the most robust growth of Chinese NGOs and their transnational collaboration" (p. 504). Such strong ties result in networks such as the China Civil Climate Action Network, a wide collaborative body made up of many stakeholder INGOs and ENGOs targeting information sharing and collaboration on climate issues (Xie, 2011).

***Media—The Mixed and Transmedia Messages of GPC Are Characterized  
by Styles That Blend Caution and Concern***

Media play a crucial role in forming a social imaginary (Appadurai, 1996). Mixed media and transmedia<sup>5</sup>—"across media" (Jenkins, 2011)—generate expressions and performances of a green cultural imaginary in China. In the past decade, the media have played increasingly important roles in promoting environmentalism. Under China's environmental liberalization, media have gained greater autonomy from the state (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). Environment-oriented stories draw the least censorship because such concerns usually fall under collective goals. Thus, the mass media are given greater latitude in

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.acef.com.cn/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Messages or stories that work across several different media platforms, together, provide a richer picture.

reporting these topics. Over the past two decades, news coverage has increased in quality as well as quantity (J. Ma et al., 2009; Yang, 2010).

Traditional media operate within and against changing state goals, opportunities, and constraints. For instance, the press constantly headlines smog hanging over urban scenes. Yet, smog narratives are cautious in attributing responsibility. Journalists remain aware that they operate within tight boundaries because all mass media work remains "carefully circumscribed by the state" (Heikkila, 2011, p. 49). Generally, environmental issues enjoy legitimacy because they are considered newsworthy, although not all stories attract equal coverage. Yang (2010) found that issues such as global warming and animal protection are politically safe, attention-grabbing, and thus likely to appear in stories. Domestic nuclear power, rural pollution, environmental impacts on disadvantaged populations, and cancer, however, get far less treatment.

Although state monitored, China's Internet offers something of a third space, a comparatively freer and growing media for environmental activism (Liu, 2011; Sullivan & Xie, 2009). Ordinary citizens and activists frequent online spaces. Web 2.0 blossomed. Pictures, videos, graphics, and posts join into circulation. Social media take transmedia connections even further. From traditional bulletin board systems (BBSs), Weibo (China's microblogs), to the wildly popular WeChat, the Internet grows discursive spaces for "green talk."

The Internet compensates for the limited resources of NGOs. With little outside support or staff, many NGOs were simply born online; other NGOs born offline actively experiment with extending initiatives and work online. Some local groups such as FON have proactively used digital media to establish their own websites, publicize causes and agendas, and thereby gain public support and mobilize citizens in nature-appreciative, depoliticized activities. GONGOs with staff and standing develop sophisticated websites that topically organize and connect grassroots NGOs, nonprofit organizations (NPOs), and others through apparatus provided by and fully accessible to the state.

Transmedia efforts are on the rise. Present campaigns appear to work through hybrid communications that blend mainstream news and digital transmedia in experimental ways. Transmedia efforts convert pictures, discourse, video, and sound to material digitally compatible with the Internet. *Under the Dome* offers the most recent albeit singular case of transmedia impact. The NGO Wild China Film, for example, combined skillfully fresh, touching images of wild animals online and offline with compelling calls for public action. Greenpeace China has often delivered well-designed videos, images, and textual messages online to engage audiences. The narrative strategies of mixed and transmedia appear to instruct how to appreciate nature, identify problems, and perform shared activities with others.

Mixed and transmedia also function as crucial links in varied degrees to connect online campaign and offline activities such as in the campaign to save the Tibetan antelope, Old Summer Palace anti-seepage campaign, and the campaign to prevent the relocation of the Beijing Zoo (Liu, 2011). Many of these cases achieved impressive results, although the mobilization involved was largely nonconfrontational and depoliticized. For instance, Greener Beijing creatively used the Internet to build a large-scale virtual alliance among various parties to participate in the campaign to save the Tibetan antelope by fighting

illegal poaching. Antelope stories were exchanged through online discussions, vivid visual images, Web-born MP3 songs, and even benefit auctions. These new media initiatives also drew attention of the mainstream media to cover the campaign. Online campaigns spread further to offline exhibition tours and benefit performances. These remained largely nonantagonistic. Activists chose a nondisruptive style. They articulated wildlife rescue as a concern for public awareness of creatures whose habitats are at risk. Follow-up action from the government became expected. The campaign successfully raised public awareness on protecting the antelope, and pushed the government to resist global trade of antelope fur.

***Action—GPC Advances Environment-Friendly Ways of  
Doing, Making, and Acting in Relation to Nature***

GPC takes on a do-it-yourself quality. The Internet offers more than a space for reading and posting; its participatory structures invite people to do, make, and attend to things together. Do-it-yourself opportunities hook people to objects that add lifestyle possibilities and meaningful protection for family and friends. ENGO and GONGO websites invite the public to attend activities, observe nature, learn new things, get trained, and document problems and solutions. Local groups organize typically around concerns specific to the well-being of local lives. Experts and residents are invited. Locals make connections across a region and share affinities and interests. GPC extends personal contributions and lifestyles with different mixes and combinations of efforts. Sometimes, these local efforts are aided by international affiliation.

The Global Greengrants Fund (2015) exemplifies a trajectory in which an IO-granting agency promotes scientific research to inform public choice. The Pesticide Eco-Alternatives Center of Yunnan was accorded a grant to study Chlorpyrifos, a persistent organic pollutant, and alternatives to the pesticides. These were to be publicized through workshops, trainings, and online courseware and put out a call for stronger regulations. The Green Qilu Action Research Center in Shandong province was accorded funding to develop an "information disclosure index" for sources of regional pollution. Its goals included training nongovernmental actors and hooking regional actors to advocacy campaigns to hold the government and business accountable (Global Greengrants Fund, 2015).

NGOs urge reform of lifestyle practices, as well. The Wuhu Ecology Center was given an award to encourage zero-waste practices and to decrease incineration activities. Urban populations and the young were supported to cultivate knowledge and appreciation of nature. Green Shoots Natural Education sought to support environmental education instructors, and Guangxi Wild Flowers Environmental Studios sought to encourage urban dwellers and school students to connect with nature and participate in community environmental actions (Global Greengrants Fund, 2015). Awards were also accorded for habitat protection, injured bird rescue, and measuring wastes. NGO projects include mixing monitoring work, ecofriendly practices, and nature appreciation. These efforts develop ecologies by meshing people and places together in eco-supportive data-acquiring performances. Shanghai's Rendu Ocean NPO Development Center, for instance, featured the protection of marine ecosystems and promised to launch initiatives that feature information sharing, network support and collaboration. Guangzhou Environmental Protection targeted inspection and monitoring of rivers around the city by local residents who would in turn pass information to the media (Global Greengrants Fund, 2015). Green network pragmatics connect experiencing, learning,

and doing through sponsoring activities that promote sustainable ecologies. IOs target-fund local groups. On-the-ground activists express passionate commitments to things at hand, and spread their creative energy through planning and bundling courses, conferences, trips, events, and reports. Small grants to groups help individuals network and organize activities. These groups seek out people who desire to appreciate and develop deeper ties to nature. Some ENGOs go further. FON recruits people to generate important facts and then publicize them. In addition, other groups train members in skills useful for documenting facts and in analytic work that identifies the causes and magnitude of problems. Local ENGOs blend expert knowledge with volunteer recruits. Documenting, collecting, and translating local facts into public claims contribute to NGO credibility and publicity.

***Discourses—GPC Discourse Promotes Ecological Thinking:  
A Wisdom-Seeking Lifestyle, Animated by Awareness of Nature***

In China, much of the public environmental discourse began online—with the birth of the Internet in the 1990s, first populated by well-educated citizens who created online postings and discussions. The Web functions as something of a commons. In print culture, reflective discourses find homes in books, journals, and magazines. In digital green culture, people move from standard formats to experiment with new genres of moral address and ethical reflection.

Through comparing online exchanges of several key ENGOs<sup>6</sup> in 2008 and 2014, we discovered a green discursive space filled with ecological thinking. ENGOs produce important discursive spaces to write, report, share, and expressively engage. Many ENGOs maintained an active BBS to facilitate online discussions and sometimes mobilize action. Each BBS was organized into several major forums with many themes and subthemes. In 2008, we observed that these forums were filled with spiritual or philosophical discourses that took up the pursuit of harmony between nature and humans. Many expressed concerns with poetic language. The posts emphasized reconciliation with living nature rather than argument for change.

The early Internet discourse we examined connected Chinese traditions—de-emphasized during recent material and economic development—back into meaningful relationship to life-world choices. In 2014, we observed that these same ENGO discourses of ethical concern have become even more personal and numerous, even though the discursive exchange online has undergone topic diversification and expansion into a greater range of areas. Discussions invite performances that reweave personal relationships with nature.

There are manifold ways that thread nature back into living. Ecotours are becoming popular. In 2014, Greener Beijing adapted its BBS forum to reflect trendy topics such as waste management and air pollution. Four new forums featured topics for living: “green action,” “green life,” “green research institute,” and “consultation, feedback, and free exchange.” Much of the new discourse in 2014 encouraged even stronger personal commitments to ecologically friendly activities. The ENGO’s most

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<sup>6</sup> These include FON, Green Beijing, Green Earth Volunteer, Wild China Film, Green Web, and Beijing Raptor Rescue Center.

popular (posted) theme was "human philosophy and ecological ethics" in both 2008 (2,365 posts) and 2014 (7,022 posts). Discourses on ENGO websites mostly appear to serve self-expressive functions rather than interactive ends, posts of inspired reflections on the ethics of living.

FON offers an affective, philosophical discursive space as well. In 2008, it sponsored a BBS that featured nature-centered forums with broad discussion threads, including "environmental education," "green life," "green hope action," and "sentiments about nature." FON later expanded the scope of its green communicative work into major social media outlets such as Sina blogs and microblogs, Tencent microblog, WeChat, and even Twitter and Facebook abroad. Recently, FON even discontinued its central BBS and added three specialized, independent online forums on "mountain climbing," "wild birds," and "plants."

ENGO discourses sometimes do invite critical-rational discussion by pointing toward legal avenues of redress. For instance, FON posts on its official blogs messages that question the conduct of businesses in relation to the environment and of government agencies on key questions such as building garbage incinerators and power plants. On one official blog, FON complained that the Department of Agriculture was withholding information from the public. FON requested an administrative review and redrawing of the boundary for the Little South Sea Nature Conservation Area for Endangered Fish.<sup>7</sup> The blog attracted more than 10,000 views. Discourse goes critical when self-responsibility in relation to nature becomes directed toward seeking accountability of agents or agencies that fail to protect the environment adequately.

Ecological discourses not only invite quiet reflection, but also percolate activity. Cultural performances put into play photos, videos, slogans, and reports on policies. The multiple environmental discourses in both the virtual and physical space are framed as Dao-speaking, scientific measurement, causal projections, embedded power stories, telling pictures, and discussions of enduring philosophical values. Dao-speaking draws from Chinese Daoism, a crucial philosophical and religious tradition that emphasizes finding the way to live in harmony with the world and nature. Through philosophical questions and topics, a common space is created to encourage exchange with others; the proliferations of stories continue to create additional imagined space for emerging narratives. These spaces are products of invention, concern, opening transition; yet, they are accomplished in cultural and local settings, inherited from a Confucian tradition<sup>8</sup> of fulfilling self and other obligations in a reciprocal relationship.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2005, a plan to build a hydropower station on the Little South Sea was put forward, which received a lot of controversy, but the plan was eventually halted by the MEP in 2015.

<sup>8</sup> A major school of thought in Chinese cultural tradition that emphasizes benevolence, social order, righteousness, reverence, and moral wisdom.

***Strategy—GPC Strategies Are Characterized by Communications That  
Sequence and Blend Cooperation and Contestation***

China's GPC strategically blends cooperation and contestation. Ho (2001) explains that ENGO leaders gain leverage by working in cooperation with the government instead of challenging it. The prerequisite for sustained activity is maintenance of legitimacy through establishing a reciprocal relationship with the state (Sima, 2011). Registration is important yet difficult. The cost is restriction of issues (Yang, 2010). ENGOs usually maneuver within a range of consensual expectations and press for change through nonconfrontational behaviors and strategies (Ho, 2007; Sima, 2011).

The Chinese term for NGO itself is equivocal, referring to an organization either simply outside the government or one contrary to it. A movement based on direct opposition and confrontation is unlikely to succeed (Stalley & Yang, 2006). The term *social movement* is also loaded because of painful memories of the Cultural Revolution. Most ENGOs appear aware of this and present goals as peaceful change and development. As a result, the green movement is regarded often as a "depoliticized," cooperative movement committed to restoration of nature (Yang, 2004). It has not emerged as a sustained confrontational force (Stalley & Yang, 2006).

Change is stressed in different ways, nevertheless. Some ENGOs are licensed to work in cooperation with the state; others register as NPOs. The remaining ENGOs are unlicensed. Typically, aggressive opposition arises when development or neglect has severe, negative local impacts. ENGO strategies are rooted in a calculation of caution. As the intensity and negativity of opposition rise, the risks to standing and chances of influence become limited by claimed threats to the "harmonious society"—China's current developmental goal. Outbreaks of protest, which continue increasing in any case, offer opportunities to develop and draw from social capital formed through cooperation with state-sponsored agencies.

Nu River offers a case in point. The decade-long campaign against building dams across a vast river basin moved through different phases. Early in 2004, it met with success. Officially, the development plan was tabled. During the early stage, several ENGOs, intellectuals, and activists confronted the prodam building side resolutely. They questioned plans openly and called attention to the project's huge negative impacts on the biome's ecosystems. Green Earth Volunteers, FON, Green Rivers, and other ENGOs held lectures and forums. Journalist Wang Yongchen spread negative assessments to the media, which publicized the issue and attracted wide public attention. Several proposals with collected signatures of opposition were organized and sent to different government divisions and even to UNESCO. Beijing ENGOs hosted exhibitions, lectures, and other oppositional activities. Local Yunnan ENGOs worked up objections among villagers along the river as well. Beijing and Yunnan ENGOs worked collectively, closely, and with media members.

After 2004, prodam interests countered with a public relations campaign. Power, development, and progress for the region and for China were ballyhooed. Faced with the strong prodam building publicity, ENGOs changed strategy to opt for a milder style of contestation. They did not refute the new claims or intensify the opposition (Sun, 2005); instead, they urged a democratic decision-making process.

Planning is required legally for large-scale development project in China (Johnson, 2010). The new goals urged the Yunnan local government and the Huadian Corporation to conduct a suitable environmental impact assessment and involve the public and various stakeholders in discussing impacts (Han, 2014).

Grassroot confrontations increase in China. Such disruptions number in the tens of thousands. "Environmental issues are now the number one cause of public protests in China" (Levitt, 2015, para. 7). ENGOs in general use a combined strategy of cooperation and contestation: contestation targeting the local government and enterprises and cooperation in issuing a call for the central government to uphold its priorities. ENGOs often need to switch roles and strategies in different configurations depending on the nature and timing of the issues, causes, and solutions.

### ***Cultural Norm—Guanxi Norms and Chinese Cultural Symbols Constitute an Indigenous Ethic of Care***

China's GPC exhibits indigenous cultural qualities, drawing on *guanxi*, a central dynamic and building block for Chinese society. The complicated personal *guanxi* networks scaffold reciprocal fulfillment of mutual obligations and function to maintain family ties, business relationships, and social structures over the long term. In China, communication is often achieved through maneuvering *guanxi* rules. ENGOs and activists often rely on informal *guanxi* ties and noninstitutional channels to negotiate relationships with various government entities to influence movement development (Han, 2014; Ho, 2007; Tang & Zhan, 2008). Such ties help ENGOs extend influence when lacking funds (Johnson, 2011). The authority held by individual party elites may open opportunities to develop informal strategies and craft environmental change onto power configurations (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). For instance, the diagonal relationships between a journalist and high government official played a crucial role in the early success of the Nu River campaign (Xie, 2011). Famous environmental activist and journalist Wang Yongchen drew on her close personal connection with Mr. Wu (known to hold ENGOs in positive regard), previous chief inspector of MEP's supervision department, to obtain updated information on substantial environmental matters and development of the inside political debate during the campaign (Xie, 2011). Informal *guanxi* networks actually shape interdependent connections between the ENGO and private and state entities.

Occasionally, actors draw forward rich and deep traditional cultural symbols to frame an oppositional campaign, linking modern environmentalism with China's cultural heritage. Advocates of the Foshan River campaign evoked the image of "mother river" when calling for preservation. Heikkila (2011) observes that while some traditional Chinese cultural values were deformed or even lost during the recent Chinese cultural revolution, still traditional regard for nature serves as a "a valuable backstop" in securing environmentally responsible development. Such values "serve as a kind of proxy for civil society" and constitutes the "essence of environmentalism with Chinese characteristics" (Heikkila, 2011, p. 49).

The campaign "Saving the Nanjing Wutong Trees" showcases how traditional regard for nature is evoked. In 2011, the Nanjing municipal government decided to uproot more than 1,000 trees to make room for the new Subway Line 3 in a mission to "make urban China modern." Many of the trees to be chopped down were the famous 70-year-old Wutong trees. The "Save the Nanjing Plane Trees, Build a

Green Great Wall" campaign sprung up with street actions and petitions following. Celebrity microblogs and the local ENGO Green Stone quickly spread information. The "green great wall" message was forwarded more than 15,000 times online. Support cascaded. Angry netizens and locals pushed standing Wutong trees as essential cultural symbols of life.

Symbols release memories. Local pride swells. The graceful Wutong was embedded in the city's history as far back as the 1920s when the body of Chinese revolutionary and cofounder of the Kuomintang party Sun Yat-sen moved there from Beijing. The downtown road was named after him. It is a meaningful historical symbol of which Nanjing locals are especially proud. For them, the Wutong is more than a symbol of life; it is also a reminder of the dark days of occupation when Japanese troops perpetrated the massacre in Nanjing. Over longer horizons, the trees fuse with Chinese culture, as these leafy trunk and branches became a major botanical image in Chinese literature, symbolizing noble personalities and serving as a Buddhism symbol (Zhuo, 2011). The trees also offer shelter from countless storms and torrid summer days for the local population. The campaign succeeded, with government halting the plan and establishing a "green assessment plan" before any tree is to be removed in the future (Meng, 2011). Cultural resources release affective responses, calling to value fusions of spontaneous and deeper associations.

Cultural resources and *guanxi* norms yoke questions of living into a strong sense of social responsibility for nature. Chinese activists remind the public of the cultural basis upon which environmentalism rests generally and of the obligations and duties embedded in personal relationships and local commitments. These cultural layers construct a valuable and inseparable indigenous quality of China's GPC.

### Conclusion

China's international, national, regional, and local commitments to the environment link manifold communicative trajectories that connect economic growth and environmental protection as uncomfortable partners. These gambits entwine hierarchically empowered and laterally related agents and agencies with duties and obligations, initiatives and responsibilities. China's "about-face" on global environmental issues may render the nation a "role model for the world," foreshadowing good and ill for the planet (Wheeland, 2015). Any GPC is a mix of historical and cultural constraints, everyday practices, and sociopolitical matrixes of power. New generations of agents and agencies emerge and experiment. In biomes across the globe, communication, adequate to suitable living in the Anthropocene, becomes stressed by disturbances caused by unanticipated "natural" events. Thus, dissensus expands.

Journalist-turned-digital-environmentalist Ma Jun took initiative recently in a network reply to Premier Li Keqiang's declaration of "war on polluters" (Carlson, 2015). He recollected that China has come a long way since he called attention to the River Fen's pollution. Then, he had written *China's Water Crisis*, a Rachel Carson-comparable act of dissent. Water facts were gathered and publicized, and reforms commenced. Presently, Jun's Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs heads the Green Change Alliance, a consortium of NGOs working on reporting corporate polluters (Levitt, 2015). The Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs made a splash by initiating a project that exposed water pollution and

creating a Blue Skies Roadmap reporting air quality. Perhaps, both ENGO and state data sources will bring into play a forensic dimension to China's GPC by putting brand reputation into the court of public opinion and by popularizing legal redress. Jun himself sees the present as a "tipping point" —a moment to turn toward ecological balance and away from hyperdevelopment projects (Levitt, 2015).

China's approach, however indigenously accountable, remains influenced by INGOs, the protocols of IOs, and international commitments. The network pragmatics of China's GPC does produce politics, largely although not exclusively through activating an ethic of care. Such a movement takes advantage of transmedia opportunities to connect within and across structures and to educate, recruit, and train agents and agencies. While multiple streams of international influences connect with local efforts, China's own environmental movement has become and remains largely a vast, novel array of communication projects connecting symbolic and material resources for living. Still, China's green activities can match word and deed in awkward, unsettling ways, for instance, by tumbling pictures of smog-shrouded cities with announcements of state reassurance. The networks of GPC perform across broad, visible and hidden events, accommodated by urgent but ambiguous activities that connect complex relationships among entangled agents, agencies, media, institutions, and populations. Of course, China is not alone in its struggles.

The complex, dissensual, dispersive activities of GPCs across the globe are called on to invent and marshal communicative resources requisite to shift away from the extractive presumptions of the Holocene (Klein, 2014). Deteriorating biomes and disruptive ecoevents necessitate communications that adapt, adjust, and thrive in the Anthropocene. China's GPC links material and symbolic resources from distinctive mixes of communicative labor. Network pragmatics invite descriptive, analytical inquiry directed to appreciate and critique the complex of communication experiments (re)convening varying, emergent GPCs working within and across planetary processes.

Twenty-first century GPC grew rapidly in China. Scattered activists initiated ENGOs and publicized online beginning in the 1990s. These efforts grew simultaneously with economic liberalization and Internet development. Debates over the precise roles of non- and quasistate actors in China's emerging civil society continue (J. Chen, 2010). Some assert that ENGOs' influence remains quite limited in contributing to a more democratic process (Tang & Zhan, 2008). Others find that environmental groups gather into a growing source of influence on policy making. Growing participation in the antihydropower development campaigns over the past decade furnish examples (Xie & Van Der Heijden, 2010). Cultural movements are not confined to pre-existing topics, forms, or outcomes. They manifest dissensus by remaining open to difference, subject to factual discovery, experiential invention, and personal initiative. A quasiopen cultural matrix generates experimentation that exceeds traditional conventions, present arrangements, and fixed futures.

Studies of public cultures should remain open to critical inquiry, especially in relation to connections with varied civic, citizen publics. Each GPC has its overlapping and distinctive aspects, as well as its particular difference. This study shows that Chinese ENGOs adopt variable positions, exhibit a style, and alter tactics adapted generally to the standing sociopolitical context. Such strategies of indirection and selective opposition may hamper a push toward wider goals, but cooperative contestation and contested

cooperation appear as signature styles of China's green activism. Network pragmatics extend "awareness and mobilization" broadly to include public culture activities, as varied as are the local conditions that generate constraints, opportunities, and demands. Group-partnering strategies permit ENGOs to maneuver political structures orthogonally and construct alliances, if not friendships, with and among those in government. ENGOs translate grassroot energies into policy influence by pushing for participation in decision making and monitoring. Finally, transmedia enable and promote ways of making, doing, acting, and learning that enable fact gathering, object assessment, and environmental defense. *Guanxi* culture provides social rules for the constant and inventive give and take among agents and agencies; traditional symbolic resources are called on to energize causes.

ENGO work is central, but its advances are open to question. J. Chen (2010) described the rule of progress: "two steps forward, one step backward." The nation does need to mitigate social and environmental grievances; yet, there remain many sociopolitical barriers in China that retard progress (J. Chen, 2010, p. 520). ENGO impact must be assessed and then judged, but thought through over the long run. With a history of two decades, China's environmental movement remains maturing. Even so, ENGO persistence and spread is notable. Lin Hong, a legal expert of FON remarked, "As long as we ENGO in China can survive and still exist, we can make a difference. The most valuable thing for us is to persist" (Jingfang Liu with L. Hong, personal communication, February 26, 2015).

The Anthropocene accelerates and spreads dissensus. Change necessitates the communicative labor and work of GPCs. The Anthropocene demands that researchers attend critically to the development of emergent, alternative communicative actions manifest in distinctive public cultures that engage varying biotic loci manifest across the planet. GPCs are emergent, changing, and antagonistic. What are the strengths and limits, the aspirations, setbacks, and achievements of our independently local yet meanwhile vast, collaborative, antagonistic communication experiments of the 21st century? We invite the study of GPCs, those particular communication experiments that invent, travel, connect, and globalize.

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