

Framing Environmentalism

A Case Study of a Chinese Environmental

Student Organization

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*Framing Environmentalism: A Case Study of an Environmental Student Organization in
China*

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Abstract

This paper identifies the key framing concepts used by Green Origin Association (GOA) to frame environmentalism in present day China for the sake of making it a public issue. High *Suzhi*, *Voluntarism* and closeness to *nature* are all concepts used by the organization to make environmentalism accessible to all sorts of people. These concepts are not limiting the organization's potential members, while at the same time entails the positive and activist ideas of environmentalism. In addition to these concepts, the organization lets its members follow some relatively simple but powerful rules of conduct, that serve as a way of strengthening the collective spirit through a notion of duty towards the other members. This together with the rest of GOA's strategic toolkit lets the group have some influence on the general public, and thus makes environmentalism a public issue.

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Introduction

When I went to China for the first time in 2010 I was unfamiliar with the concept of smog, and although discussion about climate change and environmental pollution was prominent in the media in Norway, I had never really experienced pollution close-up myself. After living six months in Beijing, I got used to not seeing the sun on most days, and understood how some citizens demanded that Beijing residents should have a day of whenever you could see the clear blue sky. It would not have been often. The experience from my time in Beijing made me more aware of global environmental issues, and specifically the Chinese context and it made me curious as to how Chinese people experience smog and pollution as opposed to foreigners living in China. This was the beginning of my interest in Chinese environmentalism.

Environmental degradation is one of the biggest problems in contemporary China. Air and water pollution has led to hundreds of millions of people having to live with increased risk of health issues, and decreased water security all throughout the country. Deforestation and desertification have led to bigger sandstorms in a large part of northern China. This is not only a Chinese problem since pollution doesn't respect national borders. Yellow dust originating from western Chinese deserts is finding its way to Japan regularly, as well does acid rain and photochemical smog.¹ Chinese environmental issues are therefore very much global issues and needs to be taken seriously by the international community as well as China.

It is clear that the Chinese model of economic growth from the 1970s up till today which emphasizes 'first develop the economy (pollute), and afterwards clean up the environment'² has taken its toll on the country's environment. Polluting factories have for years been allowed to dump its waste water in rivers and in many cases without any consequences. This was part of China's strategy for economic growth for years.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has however long since acknowledged the country's environmental problems, and have started to take action. The central government has made policy changes, and started what Chinese premier Li Keqiang called a '*war on pollution*' in

¹ Hidefumi Imura, *Environmental Issues in China Today: a View from Japan*. (Springer, 2007), 3-4.

² Author's translation of the saying: "先发展再治理". This saying was repeated by almost all the students I interviewed during my fieldwork.

the end of 2013.³ Programs to battle pollution started long before this however, and it was first mentioned in 1994 when the government released its first “*strategies for sustainable development*”.⁴ According to the World Bank in 2012 most Chinese cities have actually improved their air quality over the last decade.⁵ In spite of this, the problems are still very far from being solved.

The Chinese citizens are the ones immediately hurt by the environmental degradation and more and more people have started to try to combat these issues, by trying to live a low-carbon lifestyle, joining environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS), or engaging in online activism or protesting. Since the foundation of one of China’s first ENGO, *Friends of Nature*, in 1994, the number of Chinese ENGOS has skyrocketed as the idea of environmental protection has become more and more popular among ordinary Chinese. A big portion of the cases of social unrest and disorder in China in the last years has been due to issues related to pollution,⁶ and it is likely that pressure from the public demanding cleaner air has had a large say in putting environmental protection on the agenda for the Chinese government. It is worth mentioning also that the fact that the government is allowing ENGOS to survive and thrive are crucial for the popularity of ENGOS.

Many scholars have done research on both the current and the historical aspects of environmentalism in China⁷. This paper will contribute to this discourse, by providing the perspective of young Chinese university students. Through a case study of a University student association working for environmental protection in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, this research aims to explore the question of “*How do young Chinese university students frame environmental protection in order to make it a public issue?*” The case study is based on 18 interviews with students from this student organization, in addition to participant observation in some of the activities organized by the student organization and analysis of written material from the organizations websites. Exploring and understanding the ideas of the young generation of Chinese is important in that it can provide insight into what China will look like in the future.

³ Ben Blanchard and David Stanway, “China to ‘declare war’ on pollution, premier says” *Reuters* 2014. URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/us-china-parliament-pollution-idUSBREA2405W20140305>

⁴ Guobin Yang, “Global Environmentalism Hits China”, *YaleGlobal Online* 2004. URL: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/global-environmentalism-hits-china>

⁵ The World Bank, “Integrated Air Pollution Management in China: Developing Particulate Matter Control” *World Bank* 2012, ix.

⁶ Liu Jianqiang, “China’s new ‘middle class’ environmental protests” *China Dialogue* 2013. URL: <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/5561-china-s-new-middle-class-environmental-protests>

⁷ See for example: Shapiro, Xie, Hathaway, *Economy*.

The first chapter in this thesis will explore the historical and cultural background of the environment and environmentalism in China. In the chapter I will look at Chinese notions of nature from the Mao era until today, as well as look at the state of the environmental problems China has been and are currently facing.

Chapter 2 will describe the research method I applied in doing this study. This research is a case study based mainly on interviews, participant observation and textual analysis. The chapter will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of research and describe how I conducted my fieldwork.

Chapter 3 will introduce the theoretical framework for the study, exploring a few different social science theories that can help us understand the study of youth environmentalism in China. This chapter will mainly focus on 'Framing theory', as this is the theory I have chosen as a main framework for understanding my material.

Chapter 4 will be my analysis of the interviews, participant observation and textual analysis dataset, and will provide answers to the research question of the thesis.

In the end of the paper I will provide my conclusion, as well as a list of references.

Background

Environmentalism is a fairly young concept in China. It was only during the 1990's that the first Chinese ENGO was founded, and it did not take off as a movement until years after that. After the reform and opening in the late 1970s and early 1980s, China's main goal was economic growth and to catch up to the economic powers of Japan and western countries. This period under Deng Xiaoping in which economic growth was the number one priority certainly harmed the Chinese environment in an extreme fashion, however the idea of nature as something to be exploited for profit and human gain started earlier than this. This chapter will discuss some of the historical, social and cultural background to the environment and environmentalism in China. I will start by looking at the historical aspect, from the founding of the People's Republic and Mao's manipulation of nature, up until present day. In the next part of this chapter I will discuss some current environmental issues and try to explain how the situation is now when it comes to the state of the environment in China, ENGOs, and public opinion.

Nature in the Mao-era

The Mao-era has in many ways formed today's China. Although many aspects of Chinese society and culture have changed since when Mao ruled the country, some ideas and concepts are still similar to how they were. The Chinese notions of nature and human's place in nature are in many ways similar to how it was in the Mao years.

During the Mao-era the Chinese environment suffered greatly. According to Judith Shapiro, Mao was of the belief that man should and could do whatever he wanted to exploit nature for the gain of mankind. His famous sayings "*man should conquer nature*"⁸ and "*man's ability to know and change nature is unlimited*"⁹, both express a very pragmatic view towards nature.

Soon after Mao and the CCP came to power in China in 1949, they started criticising and discrediting scholars and scientists labelling them as "*anti-revolutionary*" and "*rightists*". Mao's unwillingness to listen to scientists was going to have huge implications for the

⁸ Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

Chinese environment.¹⁰ Shapiro writes that the Chinese scholar Ma Yinchu was writing an essay based on years of researching proving that the increasing population growth was hindering China's development. This perceived Malthusian idea was in direct conflict with Mao's and Marxist's theory, and was thus attacked by Mao, forcing Ma Yinchu to resign from his Peking University presidency and never regain any academic influence.¹¹ Had Mao listened to Ma Yinchu and other scholars who voiced their research results at the time, it could have saved both the Chinese environment and the people of much distress.¹²

Mao was of the opinion that more people meant a bigger workforce, which again meant a bigger and faster growing economy, in other words that a big population was only a positive thing. He failed to acknowledge the potential issues related to a huge population. In the end of the Mao-era the CCP did understand this, and ultimately introduced the one-child policy, which according to one of the leading Chinese environmental experts Qu Geping was crucial for the Chinese environment.¹³ The overpopulation in China under Mao led to a need to change the natural landscape. To be able to feed all the people, active measures were taken to create as much arable farmland as possible. Lakes and wetlands were filled in and mountains were literally moved in large scale projects of manual labour to provide enough space for growing grains.¹⁴ In many cases these pragmatic projects did more harm than good. Previous wetland areas were transformed into deserts, and local eco-systems were ruined. Mao's *Great Leap Forward* was another big failed policy which in turn harmed the environment as well as the Chinese people in a devastating way. Millions of people starved and the environmental consequences were huge. Deforestation on a national level was caused by fuelling backyard furnaces for smelting steel in small communities all around the country, and most of the steel even ended up not being good enough to reuse.¹⁵ The sparrows was being attacked and killed for eating too much grain, and almost exterminated in certain areas of the country. This was done to stop them plaguing the wheat harvests, but the result of the slaughter was that the insect population increased, and these in turn destroyed more of the grains than the sparrows originally did. In many cases the measures taken simply increased the problem, and unbalanced the eco-system.¹⁶ From Shapiro's study it is clear that the Mao-era in many ways

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹¹ Ibid., 21-22.

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ Qu Geping and Li Jinchang. Translated by Jiang Baozhong and Gu Ran, *Population and the Environment in China* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), 173.

¹⁴ Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature*, 62.

¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88

destabilized or ruined the eco-system in many places, and that consequences of it is still visible today, both in direct changes in landscape, such as lakes being filled, but also in thought, that nature is something that can be conquered, and exploited by man.¹⁷

Mao had an extremely pragmatic view of nature and its resources. He wanted to use nature as a tool for industrializing China, providing food, power and materials. However he did not foresee the long-term consequences of large scale unsustainable harvesting of nature's resources.

The Cost of China's Rapid Economic Growth

Starting from the reform-period in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the CCP's focus had been on economic development. As Shapiro puts it "*Urgency still leads to rapid and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, although now the urgency is to get rich rather than to achieve socialist utopia or continuous revolution.*"¹⁸ The CCP's attitude towards environmental protection has however partly shifted since the early 1990's. The UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was the first international environmental conference attended by Chinese representatives. This might have set in motion both the development of Chinese ENGOs as well as the introduction of the State Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)¹⁹ and early environmental laws and policies.²⁰ It is however clear that the Chinese environment has continued to suffer greatly in the time since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. Although the Chinese government started recognizing the importance of the environment in the 1990's, economic development was still the number one goal. Elizabeth Economy writes that China's economic growth over the last decades has been based on dirty and inefficient energy from coal²¹, and factories has been allowed to release polluted waste water directly into rivers, or emit air polluted with carbon, sulphur and other chemicals harmful to the environment, increasing both global climate change, as well as local environmental problems. According to Economy the cost of China's environmental problems is increasingly diminishing the country's actual GDP growth. She writes: "*Several studies*

¹⁷ Ibid., 195.

¹⁸ Ibid., 203.

¹⁹ This agency is as of 2008 replaced by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP)

²⁰ Catherine Yap Co, Fanying Kong and Shuanglin Lin, "Pollution Across Chinese Provinces," *Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations*. (2008): 3. URL: http://saber.eaber.org/sites/default/files/documents/ICRIER_Co_2008.pdf

²¹ Elizabeth Economy, "The Great Leap Backward? The Cost of China's Environmental Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (2007): 39.

conducted inside and outside China estimate that environmental degradation and pollution cost the Chinese economy between 8 and 12 per cent of GDP annually”.²² The cost is however not only an economical issue. Health issues in form of cancer and respiratory diseases have been rapidly increasing over the last decades, and have grown to become one of the biggest unnatural causes of death in China. The heavy pollution in certain areas has even led to the occurrence of so-called ‘cancer villages’ all around China.²³ These cancer villages are small local villages in which the inhabitants have a much higher risk of having cancer than the national average. The cause of these cancer villages is extreme levels of local pollution from nearby industries. Most prominent is high levels of heavy metals in the ground water, and heavily polluted air.²⁴ The rural population is the part of the population that is paying the highest price for China’s economic development, while at the same time reaping the least of its benefits. Most of China’s polluting industry is located in rural areas, and these are also generally speaking the poorest areas. One of the issues with the rural/urban divide is that most environmental policy is aimed at the bigger cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Environmental activism is mainly an urban phenomenon, or at least somewhat elitist, in that mainly educated people engage in it.²⁵ This is a problem because it is the rural uneducated population that is often harmed the most by it. For example if a factory is forced to close in an urban area, it might simply be moved to a more distant place out of sight of the urban middle class, and be free to continue its polluting practice there. Relatively recent examples of this practice is the case of a chemical plant planned built in Xiamen which was moved to a smaller city after protests from local residents, and a similar incident with a chemical factory in Dalian, that after protests was decided to be moved to a more rural area. Both of these instances got big media attention in China, and also reached western media.^{26 27 28} These instances are a good

²² Ibid., 46.

²³ Lee Liu, “Made in China: Cancer Villages,” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 52, no 2 (2010): 10.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Shui-Yan Tang and Xueyong Zhan, “Civic Environmental NGOs, Civil Society, and democratization in China.” *The Journal of Development Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008): 434.

²⁶ Danwei, “Citizens Air Opinions on the Xiamen PX Project,” *Danwei.org* (2007) URL: http://www.danwei.org/environmental_problems/citizens_opinions_on_the_xiame.php

²⁷ BBC NEWS, “China Protests Closes Toxic Chemical Plant in Dalian” *BBC NEWS* (2011) URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14520438>

²⁸ These kinds of instances were also discussed with my interviewees. Here is an example discussing a chemical factory in Ningbo: “*It seems like this project has not been completed, but I don’t know if it will be later. There was also a similar factory in Guangzhou, and earlier they also said there would be one here in Hangzhou, but because of people protesting in the end the factory wasn’t made. But I don’t know if it was stopped or just delayed. [...] For example if they want to make a project this year, but because you say no then they have to change it and go try in another place, see if it works there or not. If the people in that place also protest they will change to yet another city. Maybe after 2-3 years they will also try again in the original city.*” (author’s translation) “...这个项目好像呢现在还没有做，但我并不知道后来会不会做。还有包括类似的项目其实在

introduction to the next two topics in this chapter, namely the current state of the Chinese environment as well as discussion on public opinion towards the environment.

The state of the Chinese Environment

China's current environmental issues include but are not limited to air pollution, water pollution, water shortages, coastal marine pollution, deforestation, desertification, bad waste management and threatened biodiversity. The main reason for these issues is coal consumption. Although the percentage of energy from coal in China's energy mix has stayed around 70% over the last decade, the total amount of coal consumed has more than doubled from about 1.5 billion tons in 2000, to almost 4 billion tons in 2012.²⁹ The health impact of coal-burning for heat and power can be seen in a 2013 study on the life expectancy difference on people from north and south of the Huai River. Government policy provides free coal-fired heating to people north of the river. According to the study, average life expectancy is 5.5 years shorter in the areas in which coal-powered heating is provided by the government, mainly because of diseases related to air pollution.³⁰

“The Huai River policy [of free coal-driven heating north of the Huai River] had dramatic impacts on pollution and human health. To the north of the Huai River, particulate concentrations are [...] 55% higher, and life expectancies are 5.5 y [...] lower, almost entirely due to an increased incidence of cardiorespiratory mortality.”³¹

The issues are however not limited to the north, or to provinces of heavy coal mining industry like Shaanxi or Hebei, but also noticeable in all the urbanized eastern areas, as well as western and southern provinces. The pollution issues are however not the same in all areas of China.

广州那边也有，之前也说在杭州这边也要做，但都是因为人的那个抗议后来就不做。但不知道是说暂停还是终是。[...] 比如那个项目是他们本来今年要做的，然后因为你们这样说不行那他们就先换一换，到别的地方去试一试，那个地方行不行，如果那个地方本地人也抗议那再换个地方。也可能过两三年再来一样的地方试一试。” (Interview 16)

²⁹ US Energy Information Administration. URL: <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=ch>

³⁰ Yuyu Chen et al. “Evidence on the Impact of Sustained Exposure to Air Pollution on Life Expectancy from China's Huai River policy,” *PNAS* 110, no. 32 (2013): 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Some places have air pollution as the main problem, while in other areas water pollution or water shortages are main issues. However it is clear that China in general is facing extreme problems with pollution and environmental issues, many which is a result of Mao's policies or Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.

Chinese Environmentalism and Public Opinion

The first NGO to work primarily with environmental protection was the Beijing based Friends of Nature (FON). This organization as well as a handful of others was founded in the mid 1990's.³² Today there are thousands of registered ENGOs in China, in addition to thousands that is not official NGOs, but is basically NGO in intent. The groups that are unable to register as NGOs instead register creatively as for example non-profit organizations, for-profit enterprises, youth organizations or find other ways to surpass the regulations.³³

It is likely that Chinese peoples' increased problems when it comes to pollution and environmental degradation has led to the rapid rise in registered ENGOs as well as other groups, registered or unregistered, working for a cleaner environment. According to the Chinese newspaper Southern Weekend

*“Changes started in the late 1990's. The big flood in 1998, followed by the unprecedented large sandstorms in Beijing, a series of severe disasters, and the emergence of cancer villages all raised public awareness – The environment is deteriorating fast”*³⁴

Or as the famous environmentalist Wang Yongchen put it *“environmental awareness arose from hardships”*.³⁵ Historically since China's early ENGOs were established in the mid 1990s, the connection between the media and environmental activist has been important to their

³² Economy, “The Great Leap Backward?”, 53.

³³ Xu Ying and Zhao Litao, “China's Rapidly Growing Non-Governmental Organizations,” *EIA Background Brief*, no. 514. (2010): 4-6.

³⁴ (Author's translation) Original citation: 变化，自 1990 年代后期开始。1998 年的大洪水、随后北京的特大沙尘暴，一系列灾害性事件，一个个癌症村，唤起了公众的警觉——环境正在急剧恶化”

Xu Nan, The History of Chinese Environmental NGOs” (环保 NGO 的中国生命史) *Southern Weekend* (2009) URL: <http://www.infzm.com/content/35571>

³⁵ Author's translation. Original citation: “环保意识，从伤痛中来”

Xu Nan, The History of Chinese Environmental NGOs” (环保 NGO 的中国生命史) *Southern Weekend* (2009) URL: <http://www.infzm.com/content/35571>

development and work. The founders of several early ENGOs were journalist, such as Liao Xiaoyi³⁶ and Wang Yongchen³⁷. Yang Guobin writes that “*Green Camp, Green Earth Volunteers, Green Plateau, Tianjin Friends of Green, and Panjin Black-beaked Gull Protection Association are all led by journalists or former journalists.*”³⁸ This is an important reason as to why these activists and organizations, in spite of their very limited number became relevant and managed to have a fairly big influence. These media professionals managed to use their network and knowledge to widely spread their ideas and were very important for making environmental problems a public issue in China.³⁹

One of the most famous early environmental campaigns in China was concerning dam-building in the Nujiang River in Yunnan Province in the early 2000s. The area around the Nujiang River is an area of extreme bio-diversity, and Yunnan is by far the province with the highest amount of animal and plant species in all of China. Parts of the Nujiang River and surrounding areas were also made a world-heritage site by the UNESCO in 2003.⁴⁰ The government were originally going to build 13 dams along the river, but after campaigning from several ENGOs, controversy was raised and in 2004 and Chinese premier at the time Wen Jiabao decided to halt the implementation of the dams.⁴¹ In mobilizing for the Nujiang protection campaign, traditional media was extremely important. Lei Xie writes that a group of ENGOs with close ties to the media and the MEP (Ministry of Environmental Protection) “*was able to develop a strategy of regular publication in local and national journals, radio and television.*”⁴² And that “*Social influence was mobilized this way.*”⁴³ According to Lei Xie’s study, the relationship between media and ENGOs go beyond this one example, and is typical of how the ENGOs work. However, environmental activism is still not a completely safe issue politically, and not all environmental information will be accessible to the people. According to Yang Guobin’s study, certain issues are less likely to be reported. Cases related to public health are much less likely to appear in the media, even though it is closely related to environmental degradation and pollution problems, and framed using an environmentalist

³⁶ Journalist and founder of the ENGO Global Village of Beijing in. See this website for more information: <http://www.c-can.cn/en/node/652>

³⁷ Journalist and founder of the ENGO Green Earth Volunteers. See this website for more information: <http://www.c-can.cn/en/node/668>

³⁸ Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, “Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China” *China Information*, no 21. (2007): 221.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ UNESCO, “Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas”, URL: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1083>

⁴¹ Yang and Calhoun, “Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China,” 211.

⁴² Lei Xie, *Environmental Activism in China* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 102.

⁴³ Ibid.

framework.⁴⁴ Several of my interviewees did no longer experience environmentalism as a politically sensitive issue⁴⁵, but the next paragraph will discuss why I believe it still is.

Environmentalism as a Sensitive Issue

In late February 2015, the famous Chinese TV journalist Chai Jing published a documentary about air pollution in China that she had been working on for a year. The almost 2 hour long documentary was greeted with enthusiasm and immediately went viral, having more than 100 million views in only a couple of days after its release according to the BBC.⁴⁶ The documentary aims to understand what Smog (*wumai* 雾霾) is, where it comes from and how it can be fought. Through interviews with workers, regular citizens, activists, leaders of polluting industries, and different government officials, she discusses many of the issues with smog and pollution in contemporary China. Only days after being released the video was suddenly removed from Chinese websites, censored by the Chinese government.⁴⁷ This incident proves two things: (1) environmentalism is still a sensitive issue in China, and (2) it is telling of how much environmental issues matter to people in China.

The question of sensitivity is however more complex. Environmentalism consists of several different issues, where some can be relatively safe, while others are still seen as sensitive to the government. As Yang puts it, issues concerning health are still very much a sensitive issue, and this might explain party why the video by Chai Jing was censored. Another important reason is that the documentary directly encouraged public action and participation. Public action and nationwide movements are some the things the Chinese government fears the most and they have a very strict policy, cracking down on movements with this kind of potential, like they did in the infamous cases of the student rebellion in 1989, and the Falun Gong movement in 1999.

Another interesting point about this video is that it yet again shows the importance of media contacts and journalists in environmental work. It clearly shows the connection between environmental activism and the media, and how great of an impact this connection can have

⁴⁴ Yang guobin, "Brokering Environment and Health in China: Issue Entrepreneurs of the Public Sphere," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no 63 (2010): 106-7.

⁴⁵ Original citation: "环保已经不算一个敏感的事情了" (Interview 11)

⁴⁶ Celia Hatton, "Under the Dome: The smog Film Taking China by Storm," *BBC NEWS* (2015) URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-31689232>

⁴⁷ Edward Wong, "China Blocks Web Access to 'Under the Dome' Documentary on Pollution," *New York Times* (2015) URL: <http://cn.nytimes.com/china/20150308/c08dome/dual/>

in spreading the message. In today's China, traditional media like newspapers, TV and radio is still important, but with the massive increase in people with almost unlimited internet access over the last decade, online social media has become extremely important in spreading environmental information. After discussing the case of Chai Jing's video that went viral, it is easy to think that environmentalist activism is fighting against the government. This is however not the case. The government's action in this case is obviously hurting the work of Chinese ENGOs, but the aim is more likely to limit potential social unrest than to stop environmentalists. Environmentalism in China can not be seen as a battle between the government and environmental activists, and most ENGOs apply non-confrontational strategies. The government has also taken a lot of measures towards limiting the pollution and environmental problems in the country. According to Hathaway the Chinese government has taken a lot of big measures for combating environmental degradation. "*China enforced the world's largest logging ban, converted massive areas of agricultural and grazing land to forest, and confiscated hundreds of thousands of guns as part of increasingly strict laws against hunting.*"⁴⁸ Another example is in Zhejiang province where the fieldwork for this thesis was done; there is an on-going project of cleaning up the province's rivers⁴⁹, but there are hundreds more. Both the central government as well as the different provincial and local governments are all aware of the problems environmental degradation is causing and although the idea of "*first developing and then cleaning up*" is still prevalent in many places, the fact is that the government is aware of the problem and has started acting.

⁴⁸ Michael J. Hathaway, *Environmental Winds: Making the Global in Southwest China* (University of California, 2013), 8.

⁴⁹ Lingling Qu, "Hangzhou plans to rehabilitate 47 black stinky rivers this year(...)", Hangzhou Government (2014), URL: <http://www.hangzhou.gov.cn/main/zwdt/bmdt/cj/T491007.shtml>

Methodology

Methodology is a crucial part of any research project, and being clear about the various advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of methodologies is important when designing a research project. This chapter will describe my fieldwork and the research methodologies applied in it. It will explain the choices I made and my thought process throughout the course of preparing and conducting the fieldwork for my master-thesis.⁵⁰

Qualitative Research

Creswell writes that “*We conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature.*”⁵¹ In other words we would like to explore the depth of an issue, which in my case would be Chinese university students understanding of the current environmental crisis.

When designing a research project it is important to figure out which methodologies best fit with the study one wants to do. Both in relation to the type of answers one wants to achieve, as well as what is actually a feasible study to do. Qualitative and quantitative studies are both good ways of conducting research, and according to Silverman a combination of the two often also works well.⁵² For my study, I was more appealed to doing a qualitative study for a few reasons. The main reason being that qualitative research training is a much bigger part of the curriculum at my faculty, and I was therefore more prepared to do this kind of study. The other reason was that I felt I would reach a better understanding of the organization by immersing into it and being a part of it myself. I do however believe that using both a qualitative or quantitative research model can give good results.

⁵⁰ For more detailed information about my research methodology and fieldwork, see my paper on research methodology from the fall of 2014. Although my research question has been modified since that paper was written, the fieldwork is the same, and the paper is still valid. “*EAST4010 – Research Methodology in East Asian Studies*” Marius Ledum, (Candidate Number 2001).

⁵¹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (Sage Publications 2006): 40.

⁵² David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, (Sage Publications, 2010), 140-1.

Case Study

John Gerring defines a case study as “*an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.*”⁵³ Together with my supervisor I decided to do my fieldwork in Hangzhou in Zhejiang province. The reason for this was that I had connections to a gatekeeper through my supervisor, and was thus able to find the biggest environmental student organization in Zhejiang, and was easily able to connect with them. The term gatekeeper refers to a person with connections that can help a researcher get in contact with a certain group of informants. Gatekeepers are important in that they build trust between the researcher and the informants, and they are especially important in the Chinese context, where connections and “*guanxi*”⁵⁴ is extremely important culturally. My gatekeeper helped me get information about the student organization, and put me in contact with the leader of the organization long before I went to China for my fieldwork, and was very helpful both before and during my stay in China. This made both me and the leader of the organization to be able to prepare for my fieldwork much better in advance.

The environmental student organization is a well-known, so-called *five star organization* at Zhejiang University. It is relatively big, and has around 300 members, of which the biggest part is first and second year students. The reason for the majority being first and second year students is that many are moved to other campuses as their study becomes more specialized, while most of the activities organized by Green Origin Association are located at the main campus. The organization has a long history. It was founded in 1999, and the founder has later continued his work in environmentalism by working for the professional ENGO Green Zhejiang⁵⁵. This connection with a professional ENGO has helped the student organization develop.

A problem with conducting a case study is that it is hard to know if the case is actually representative of something bigger than the case itself. This is a problem both in a study using only one case, as well as studies using multiple cases. Lei Xie writes that although she had chosen four different cases for her study to “*provide diversity with respect to economic level, the openness of local political authority and the prevailing local culture.*”⁵⁶ it was still hard

⁵³ John Gerring, “What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?”, *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004): 342.

⁵⁴ The Chinese word «*Guanxi*» is referring to networking, or a system of connections between people. It is a very important aspect of Chinese society and culture.

⁵⁵ (绿色浙江)

⁵⁶ Lei Xie, *Environmental Activism in China* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 159.

to encompass all the differences in localities across China, such as the western provinces, or urban-rural differences.⁵⁷ Making a representation that is valid for the whole of China is impossible regardless of how big a study you conduct, because of the fact that there are so many local differences in this enormous country. My study can therefore also not claim to be representative of the whole of China, however as Jennifer Rowley points out, a case study is good in that it can provide deeper answers to how and why questions, and it is good for providing insight into a contemporary phenomenon.⁵⁸ The aim of my case study is to provide insight and explore young university students' way of framing environmentalism, and how they engage in environmental work and view the current environmental crisis.

Interviews

During my 6 week fieldwork I conducted 18 interviews with students from GOA. I did not actively chose my own informants, but the vice leader of the organization helped me find students that were willing to be interviewed. The process was done in a way where she asked all the students in the organization if anyone was willing to be interviewed by me on the topic of Chinese environmentalism, and then I arranged to meet whoever replied to her. The vice leader contacted the students by sending them a group SMS, and this was also one of the main ways they informed members about different activities the organization organized, so the students were used to the format. Because of the way the process worked, I was at first not able to influence which students to interview. After doing about 8-10 interviews, I noticed that most of the students so far had been first-year students, and thus only been a part of GOA for a few months. I therefore decided to ask the vice leader of the organization to send another message to the members, but this time ask specifically for students that had been in the organization at least one year. This was important to the research because I, not surprisingly, found that the second year students' thoughts about environmentalism were much more refined and more in line with the 'official' ideas of the organization. I therefore decided it would be important to include a relatively even distribution of these two groups, the first year students and the students that had stayed for more than one year.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 161

⁵⁸ Jennifer Rowley, "Using Case Studies in Research", *Management Research News* 25, no 1, (2002): 17.

Addition Sources

According to Kathleen M. Dewalt and Billie R. Dewalt, participant observation can provide many advantages to social science research. They claim that “*First, it enhances the quality of the data, obtained during fieldwork. Second, it enhances the quality of the interpretation of the data [...]. Third it encourages the formulation of new research questions and hypothesis grounded in on-the-scene observation.*”⁵⁹ It can enhance the quality of collected data, because it provides the researcher with a more natural setting to examine than the interview-setting. It can enhance the quality of the interpretation of the data because the researcher can put information from the interviews into a context. Participant observation is also freer from biases provided by potentially wrongly directed interview questions. In general it is a good idea to include different strategies of data collection in a research project, as each method has its given advantages and get help paint the whole picture. In my case, using participant observation in addition to the interviews helped me by giving me the possibility to see the student in a more natural setting. Although the main part of my analysis is based on my interviews and some literary analysis, the participant observation I did made gave me a more thorough understanding of the issues at hand and led me to slightly reformulate and add some questions into the interviews based on this understanding. As mentioned I also analysed some written material from the student organization’s website, and I also used some written material like this as a reference point to understanding the general idea of the leaders of the organization.

⁵⁹ Kathleen M. DeWalt, and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*, (AltaMira Press 2011): 10.

Theoretical Framework

Public Issues

In China as well as in most societies in the world there are issues discussed in the public sphere. These are referred to as public issues. These issues are for some reason given more space in the public discourse than other issues, and can be very different based on local situations. So are the limitations on these issues, some are limited to a provincial level, while others are national or global issues. What the issues have in common is that they are public in the sense that they are openly discussed by the media or other actors in society at large and are a part of the public discourse. Depending on the circumstances not everything can become a public issue. In the Chinese case one of the things that can hinder something from becoming a public issue is the political system. The Chinese government is to a high degree controlling the media and the internet, and is censoring information that they don't want to be a part of the public discourse and this might stop something from becoming a public issue. Sometimes something can become a public issue, even though the government would not like it to become one. However, many issues can also be so-called semi-public, or public issues limited in time. Two examples of issues that become semi-public issues in China for a limited time, although the government tried to censor it, was the SARS-epidemic in 2004 leading to public debate on health and hygiene issues, and the high speed railway scandal in 2011 leading to debate on corruption and safety issues. The chances of such high-stakes issues entering the public sphere is however small.⁶⁰

The public issue discussed in this paper is of course environmentalism. This has from the 1990s increasingly become an important public issue in China. My interviewees in Hangzhou all said that environmental protection and pollution were issues that most people knew about at this point. This is of course not necessarily true, but it is safe to assume that most middle-class, rural citizens have at least a certain amount of knowledge about this issue. The statement from all of the students surely does imply that environmental protection is very much a public issue.

Public issues can be created by issue entrepreneurs. This can be different societal actors such as the government itself, more or less independent or state lead organizations, media outlets, public figures or grassroots activists.

⁶⁰ Yang, "Brokering Environment and Health in China", 101.

In my case study, I will be looking at a ENGOs or more specifically the environmental student organization in Hangzhou where I did my fieldwork. To understand how the organization is creating these public issues, I will use framing theory as my main theoretical tool. In the following section I will explain framing theory, and how I can use it to provide answers for my research question. In this chapter I will first explain what framing theory is and connect it to public issues and explain why it is relevant for my study. Later in the chapter I will explore some parts of framing theory more thoroughly. As my case study is fairly limited in scope, and the student association is mainly working with spreading environmentalism on campus, I will use this situation as a micro-public, and I believe it will have similarities with how bigger professional ENGOs work with a larger geographical scope.

Framing Theory

Framing theory tries to explain how wording and discourse used as a strategic tool by social movement activists and social movement leaders can help them achieve their goals. William Hurst define Framing as the

*“Conscious strategic efforts of groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action”*⁶¹

In other words framing theory is a social science theory used to understand and explain social movements. Before we discuss the theory any further, it is reasonable to start by defining the concept of ‘frame’. According to Pamela Olivier and Hank Johnston *“frames constitute the cultural toolkit of everyday life that permits social actors to move in and out of different experiences as if they were not completely new.”*⁶² This is to say it provides people with a context for them to understand a situation. Frames help people identify and label situations, objects or occurrences. For example, to be able to make a joke, one needs the knowledge of what constitutes something funny and what does not. Of course these frames are not identical from one person to another; they are different based on a person’s culture, background and experiences. Even though frames can be understood as individual in many cases they are often

⁶¹ William Hurst, “Mass Frames and Worker Protest” in *Popular Protest in China* Edited by: Kevin O’Brien (Harvard University Press, 2009) : 72.

⁶² Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Ideology and Frames in Social Movement Research," *Mobilization* 5, no. 1 (2000): 2.

shared. They become important for understanding collective action when they are shared by a group of people, in other words when a group of people share the same ideas and understanding of a situation, occurrence, action, etc.⁶³ When something is understood the same way by a big group of people, it can lead to collective action and a large-scale social movement.

Frames can be created or molded by social actors, such as NGOs, the government or the media. This creation or molding of frames is referred to as framing, and this is the main idea in framing theory. Olivier and Johnston writes: “*Applied to social movement studies, framing processes mostly refer to the intentional activity of movement entrepreneurs at the organizational level.*” By Robert Benford and David A. Snow framing is also referred to as production of meaning. “*Social movements are not viewed merely as carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies. Rather, movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers.*”⁶⁴ The result of this framing process gives us what is referred to as “collective action frames”.⁶⁵

Collective Action Frames

Benford and Snow writes that “*Collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization*”⁶⁶ In other words, these are the ideas that lead followers of the social movement to take action. These collective action frames evolve, and are often the results of a negotiation for shared understanding within the social movement organization.⁶⁷

‘Frames’ can be separated into three categories which have different agendas or tasks. Benford and Snow refer to these as (1) “*diagnostic framing*”, (2) “*prognostic framing*” and (3) “*motivation framing*”.⁶⁸ The aim of “*diagnostic framing*” is problem identification. The movement actors want to figure out where a problem or injustice is coming from and who is

⁶³ Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea!", 4.

⁶⁴ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 613.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 614.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 615.

responsible for it.⁶⁹ “*Prognostic framing*” refers to framing aimed at proposing a solution for the problem, and a strategy for how the movement can make changes.⁷⁰ The aim of “*motivational framing*” is to make people engage in collective action.⁷¹

Social movements that share the same starting point and see the source of a problem similarly can be separated by having different ideas when it comes to how to handle these problems. An example of this can be seen in the Norwegian environmental movement, where there are two main blocks. Both sides believe that human destruction of the environment is a big problem, and that global carbon emissions need to be reduced for the sake of limiting climate change. However when it comes to how to tackle this problem major differences appear. One side believe that Norway should focus more on developing and producing renewable energy, and create big areas with windmills in the Norwegian mountains, and thus limiting dependency on fossil fuels. The other side however believes that the Norwegian mountains need to remain untouched, and that the reduction in fossil fuel dependency can be achieved elsewhere. Both sides share the same “*diagnostic framing*”, but are differentiated when it comes to “*prognostic framing*”.

Master Frames

In social movement theory, large-scale frames can also encompass more than one single issue. The concept of a ‘master frame’ is an overarching frame that can influence many social movements of an era. These master frames may lead people and movement leaders to see issues in a certain way. Olivier and Johnston write that “*movement participants draw upon master frames to portray their perceived injustice in ways that fit the tenor of the times and thus parallels other movements*”.⁷² One example of such a master frame that influences many different social movements is the “rights frame”. As the name indicate this master frame is based on the idea of rights, and it was the overarching idea of many social movements from the 1960s until today in movements concerning civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, animal rights, etc.⁷³

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 616.

⁷¹ Ibid., 617.

⁷² Olivier and Johnston, "What a Good Idea!", 4.

⁷³ Ibid.

Environmental movements have historically been framed in a few interesting ways. In America in the 1980s and 90s the idea of “environmental justice” was constructed by people mobilizing against living in areas with toxic pollution.⁷⁴ This frame is also based under the master frame of ‘rights’ as mentioned above. According to Capek, the movement for environmental justice perceives themselves as stigmatized “second-class” citizens, without the same rights as the rest of the population. They are lacking what they perceive as a basic right of living in a healthy environment.⁷⁵ The idea of environmental justice can also be found in China. One example of this is the case of the Nujiang river protection movement from the early 2000s. At the time the Nujiang river was the last of the big untamed rivers in China, and plans to build several large-scale dams along the river was released in 2003, many ENGOs engaged in trying to protect the river. The ENGO “Green watershed” led by Yu Xiaogang was one of the main voices in the opposition to the dam-building plans. In addition to using risk-management and bio-diversity as main frames, environmental rights were also clearly important. Yu Xiaogang was concerned with how the poor people living in the areas would be affected by the construction of dams. He thus expressed the need for ‘social impact assessments’ before large scale construction projects.⁷⁶ Although certain ‘rights’ movements have been met with a hard hand by the Chinese government, such as the Falun Gong and the democracy movement, the environmental rights idea is not in direct conflict with the government.

⁷⁴ Stella M. Capek, “The ‘Environmental Justice’ Frame: A Conceptual Discussion and an Application”, *Social Problems* 40, no. 1. (1993): 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁶ Green Watershed, "Social Impact Assessment (社会影响评价)." URL: <http://d.kmwzjs.com:10125/news-325-11810.html> “Green Watershed is proposing to have the government make social impact assessments included in large scale projects. Through capacity building in the affected communities and NGOs, make social impact assessment, and take part in large projects decision making, and in the end reach a better result.” (Author’s translation) 绿色流域通过倡导使政府将社会影响评价纳入大型开发项目审批过程，通过能力建设受影响社区和 NGO 能够运用社会影响评价方法，参与大型项目决策，最后达到更加公正的结果

⁷⁷ The Goldman Environmental Prize, "Yu Xiaogang." URL: <http://www.goldmanprize.org/2006/asia>

Analysis

In this chapter I will take an analytical look at the Green Origin Association, how it works and how it frames the issues of environmentalism.

Green Origin Association⁷⁸

Green Origin Association (GOA) is a student association at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. The Association works with environmental issues, and the fieldwork for this thesis was done in this student association. The Association was founded in 1999, and has been growing slowly ever since. It has more than 300 members, mostly first and second year students, but also some more senior students. The association work mainly with raising the environmental awareness of fellow students on the university campus, but they do also have minor programs and activities aim at people outside of campus. The groups guiding principle is “*be close to nature while putting environmental protection into practice*”⁷⁹ which tells of an active attitude towards environmentalism. It is also telling of a close relationship with nature. Another saying that the group uses a lot is “leading a green life is up to me, and up to all of us.”^{80 81} This motto refers to the small actions taken by all people. It means that if everybody does a little, it can have a big impact. Both of these sayings are clearly motivational, in that they aim to make people act. I will come back to these sayings later in the chapter. The main goal of the association is to spread environmental awareness to the students on campus but the group has also some projects for increasing environmental awareness in the surrounding areas around campus as well.

GOA has 8 different departments. In this section i will shortly describe the responsibilities and area of work of these different departments.

- Department of experiencing nature 自然体验部

The responsibility of this department is to give the students the opportunity to experience nature first-hand. Either through short evening trips on the university campus, or through weekend-long hiking trips in the nearby mountains. The trips are giving students an

⁷⁸ Chinese name: *Lǜzhīyuán* (绿之源)

⁷⁹ Author’s translation (亲近自然，践行环保)

⁸⁰ Author’s translation (“绿色生活，从我做起，从身边做起”)

⁸¹ “Zhejiang University Green Origin Association Introduction”, (浙江大学学生绿之源协会介绍) URL: http://www.cde.zju.edu.cn/redir.php?catalog_id=735

opportunity to appreciate nature and at the same time trying to learn the students about plant-life and eco-systems.

- Department of project development 项目拓展部

This department works with coming up with longer term project for the entire association. Examples of such projects are the recycling project on campus which they have started together with the university administration, as well as a project trying to change disposable plastic bags from the on-campus supermarkets with reusable cotton ones. These projects are meant to engage both the members of GOA, but also reach and impact other students on campus.

- Department of environmental education 环境教育部

This department works specifically with spreading knowledge about environmentalism and pollution to different groups of people. Their main goal is to spread knowledge to fellow students by different means. One way is to write educational articles which they publish in university newspaper or distribute themselves through social media, and another method is by having stands and activities on campus on the weekends with games and information.

- Bird-watching and protection department 观鸟护鸟部

This department organizes weekly bird-watching trips for members and non-members of the GOA. Most attendants are members, but it is also open to non-members who are interested. The trips are usually in the parks on campus, but sometimes also in other local parks. The guide will teach the attendants to recognize different kinds of birds, both visually and by sound, and they often arrange quizzes and games afterwards with the information from the trip.

- Center of quality development 素质拓展中心⁸²

This department works with improving the association from the inside. The main goal is to improve the *suzhi* of the members. This is done by education and learning teamwork. The department organizes activities and games for the group in which they need to work together to succeed. By doing this the group members get to know each other better, learn problem

⁸² The word quality (素质) is interesting, and it is seen many places in present day China. While a very thorough analysis of Suzhi-discourse is outside the scope of this thesis, I will discuss it in the context of framing environmentalism later in the paper.

solving and also learn to work as a team. The second main goal is to improve the association's member's environmental consciousness.

- Center of propaganda and networking 宣传网络中心

This department is in charge of making promotional posters and videos to get public attention and recognition. They are also responsible for keeping the groups social media accounts up to date, and publish articles and information about the groups work.

- Center of culture and promotion 文化推广中心

This department is mainly focused on writing articles that promote the association and its cause. With the help of the department of propaganda and networking, these articles are published in the student paper and promoted on the different social media outlets the association uses, such as Renren, Wechat and Weibo.

- Center of external communication 对外交流中心

This department works mainly with off-campus connections. They have one project in which they give classes to local primary schools to educate children in issues regarding the environment. They discuss anything from proper garbage disposal to global warming, and try to improve the children's understanding of environmental issues. They have another similar project in which they have set up stands and educate residents in the housing communities outside the university campus.

Generally speaking the group appear very professional for being a student association, and this is probably because of its long history and fairly close connection to real ENGOs. The group has a relatively big influence on campus, through all these various projects they engage in. In addition to the department specific work mentioned above the association also have long term cross-department projects. I will shortly elaborate on one of these now.

One of GOA's main projects is a cardboard box recycling project. The project is based around recycling Tetra Pak cartons from milk, juice, yoghurt and other drinks. GOA has set up containers for students to throw away only these kinds of boxes. The group has engaged a local Cardboard factory in the project, and they come to pick up the cardboard once every other week, or when the containers are full. In return the factory gives GOA some recycled materials, such as books, which the association then uses for marketing. These books can be

handed out as prizes for when the organization organize some events on campus, and are given to both non-members and members. It is important that the information about these campaigns reach out to the general public on campus, or else the results will not be as good. Therefore the group has created a mascot which is basically a big cardboard box that has holes for arms, head and legs, so that whenever the group organize information campaigns one of the members can walk around as a living cardboard box.

Framing Environmentalism

My findings suggest that environmental issues are framed in a few key ways. The three main ways it is framed is the following: (1) placing environmentalism into the current Chinese framework of *suzhi*; (2) using terms relating to *voluntarism*, and *charity*; and (3) using terms related to *nature*. In this part of the paper I will discuss and explain how the framing is done, and its implications.

Suzhi

*“I think university students and people with a higher degree of education, have a higher suzhi, and therefore also have greater environmental awareness”*⁸³

Framing environmentalism as something related to *suzhi* fits well in present day China. *Suzhi* is translated to English as *quality* or *human quality*. Originally ‘*Suzhi*’ was referring to the innate qualities of human bodies and their conduct, however over time and after the reform period in the early 1980s, the term changed to being something learned, and something malleable.⁸⁴

Framing environmentalism as a *suzhi* issue makes it appealing for the general population. It is a way of making sure everyone has a framework for understanding it. This will potentially make the entire population try to improve, as having high *suzhi* is something that people put in high regards, and most people have an understanding of *suzhi*. As can be seen in in the

⁸³ Authors translation (我觉得大学生, 受教育的程度高一点, 大家的素质也会高一些, 环保意识也会强很多) Interview 3.

⁸⁴ Racheal Murphy, “Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens: ‘Population Quality’ Discourse, Demographic Transition and Primary Education.” *The China Quarterly*, No 177, 2004 (pp. 1-20)

citation above, the idea of *suzhi* is very much connected to education, and it is a general idea that good education leads to higher *suzhi*. That is why one of GOA's main goals is to provide environmental education both on and off campus, improving both environmental awareness and *suzhi*.

The word has been used for different government-led propaganda campaigns in the previous decades, for example when it comes to population control and education.⁸⁵ In these cases the term '*suzhi*' has been used actively by the government as a way to govern the population and achieve social control. Instead of writing posters with "if you get two children you will have to pay a big fine", they put posters with "having one child is having high *suzhi*, and it is the first step to modernization". In this way the government can achieve power and social control by having the population aiming for these moral examples. The state gives the population incentives to govern themselves. The government saw a population with high *suzhi* as very important for China to modernize and reform, and achieve its goals of becoming a rich and strong country.⁸⁶ Through propaganda campaigns the idea of *suzhi* has become well-known to most Chinese. So an interesting question is why would a relative autonomous environmental student association use the government's propaganda toolkit to frame its environmentalism, when this can be said to be an extension of the government's power and suppression? Bakken writes that this can simply be the result of culture and worldview.⁸⁷ The idea of *suzhi* has become a huge part of Chinese culture, and the Chinese grassroots organizations will just use whatever tools they have accessible and seem fit. Additionally the ENGOS might not see any problems with working with or helping the government on these issues and by using the government's own discourse it is hard for the government to contest the message. Framing environmentalism in terms of *suzhi* therefore legitimizes the movement both towards regular people and the government. Whether or not this is an active strategy taken on by the movement leaders is hard to tell, but the effects are none the less the same.

*"The level of education revived by the older generation of Chinese wasn't very high, so they probably don't understand these things. Naturally their environmental awareness is not very good."*⁸⁸

⁸⁵ In these cases the terms 人口素质 and 素质教育 has been used.

⁸⁶ Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oxford University Press, 2000): 60.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁸⁸ "中国老一辈的这个文化接收的程度不是很高吧，他们可能对这些东西不太了解所以他们的环保意识肯定不会很强的" Interview 1.

Suzhi can be said to exemplify the gap between the urban middle- and upper-class and rural lower class. The urban population generally has higher *suzhi*, while rural population is seen as lacking *suzhi*. *Suzhi* is closely related to education and therefore also the older uneducated generation of the urban population are often seen as lacking *suzhi*. It is worth to mention that the *suzhi* discourse can also be used discriminatory. Many people will discriminate against rural farmers or immigrant workers because they lack *suzhi*. Some people will therefore have a negative notion towards the whole concept of *suzhi*, and call it elitist. However it is not used as discriminatory by the GOA, but merely as factual as a way of creating awareness around the importance of environmental education and education in general.

GOA also has a department within the association which main goal is to increase the *suzhi* of the group members. This is to build better relationships within the association and help the students increase their skills in problem solving and cooperation.

Voluntarism

*“At the time [of joining GOA] I did not have a deep understanding of environmental protection - I just wanted to do some public good. I just knew that this problem has become very serious.”*⁸⁹

The second way the GOA frames its environmentalism is by using terms like voluntarism and charity. Both of these two things have become rather popular in present day China. Many of my interviewees expressed similar views as the citation above, about this being a main reason for joining GOA. Activism and voluntary work is seeing a boom in popularity currently in China. This can be seen from the amount of NGOs in China which has increased massively over the last decade, also when it comes to other matters than environmentalism. In 2009 there were more than 400,000 registered NGOs in China, compared to less than 10,000 in the early 1990s. In addition to the registered ones, estimates suggest that there are up to 10 times more unregistered NGOs that operate in the gray areas of China’s civil society.⁹⁰ Because of the nature of the Chinese NGO system, it is hard to get an actual number, specifically on ENGO, but the number have certainly increased massively since the first ENGOs was

⁸⁹ “当时对环保的理解不是很深，只是想投身去做一些公益的事情。就是觉得这个问题已经很严重了” Interview 2.

⁹⁰ Yu and Zhao, “China’s Rapidly Growing Non-Governmental Organizations,” 9 and i.

founded in the early 1990's. During my interviews, several students expressed that it was the charitable aspects of working with environmentalism that drove them, which might be partly because of the rise of the general popularity of NGOs in China.

Framing the group's work as charitable and as contributing something to the public will make their work more appealing to the students that are unsure about environmentalism. As the vice leader of the association told me, "Joining this organization is not only for environmental reasons, but also for doing something good for the public."⁹¹

Nature

The third way the framing is done is by using terms related specifically to nature, and in particular to experiencing and enjoying nature. This appeal to many of the students on campus who are mainly from urban areas, and have not previously experienced nature first hand. They are intrigued by green forests and big mountains. This idea of nature and a green society and lifestyle are popular terms in China today. When doing the fieldwork for this thesis in Hangzhou, I noticed a vast amount of billboards and commercials where wording such as *green* (绿色), *green life* (绿色生活), *green society* (绿色社会), *nature* (自然), *low-carbon lifestyle* (低碳生活) and similar concepts were used as a way of appealing to consumers and customers. It is clear that these ideas are appealing to many people in China, also outside of environmental activist-circles. This is evident not only from my observation of marketing campaigns in Hangzhou, but also from Yang's study on public issues in China.⁹²

The main slogan of the GOA is "*be close to nature while putting environmental protection into practice*"⁹³. This slogan shows us that GOA sees enjoying and experiencing nature as a crucial part of environmentalism. Many young urban Chinese have only had very limited experiences with nature. Being brought up in big cities, the closest many have been to nature is often parks. One of my interviewees said that the main reason for joining GOA was to experience nature and in particular bird-watching, and not environmental protection per se.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Author's translation. (加入绿之源不只是为了做环保，也是要做一些公益的东西) Interview 17.

⁹² Yang, "Brokering Environment and Health in China", 106-8.

⁹³ (亲近自然，践行环保)

⁹⁴ Authors translation ("我们绿之源有几个部门，不仅是环保还有观鸟护鸟部，自然体验部。我其实对这两个部门比较感兴趣") Interview 8.

This fits well with the slogan and the main goal of the association, to give students the opportunity to experience nature's beauty as many of these students will later have fond memories and experiences in nature and thus want to help combat its destruction. Similar strategies has been used by both Chinese and international ENGOs previously. Joy Y. Zhang and Michael Barr's study explains how many Chinese ENGOs have started organizing free natural photography courses. These courses are based on the same idea, that first-hand experiences with nature is something powerful, and can lead people to be more conscious about the vulnerability or nature. At the same time the visible negative impact of pollution will lead people to care more for the environment. As one of the interviewees in their study expressed, these kinds of experiences will "seed a notion" in the people attending.⁹⁵

Many of my interviewees expressed similar views, with focus on the pleasure of experiences with nature and the sadness toward all the pollution that is destroying this beauty.

*"In my hometown there are some chemical factories, drugs manufacturing factories, and manufacturing drugs leads to air and water pollution. The main river in the area has become heavily polluted. Originally we could swim in the river, and we could also fish and catch crabs and so on. Now we can no longer do any of this. 10 years ago it was OK to swim there, but around 5-7 years ago the pollution was at its most intense. Because of a water treatment program over the last couple of years, the water is better now."*⁹⁶

Many of the students told me about issues of pollution in their hometowns, and how it had escalated since they were younger. These problems were mainly water and air pollution issues. As mentioned previously in this paper, Wang Yongchen attributed the increased interest in environmental protection as a result of years watching the environment deteriorate.⁹⁷ I also see this as one of the main reasons for the growth of environmental attitudes in China. Many of my interviewees echoed this sentiment both actively by saying how they were tired of so

⁹⁵ Joy Y. Zhang and Micheal Barr, "Recasting Subjectivity Through the Lenses: New Forms of Environmental Mobilization in China," *Environmental Politics* 22, no. 5 (2013): 859-60.

⁹⁶ ("我老家那边有好几个化工厂，就是制药厂，制药的话会有一些大气污染，水污染。我们那边的母亲河已经被强污染掉了。本来里面可以游泳啊，然后还可以钓鱼啊，抓螃蟹，之类的。现在都没有了。十年前还是可以游泳的，然后七年到五年前污染最严重的。然后最近几年因为有一个治理水质的一个项目水质好了一些") Interview 6.

⁹⁷ Author's translation. Original citation: "环保意识，从伤痛中来"

Xu Nan, *The History of Chinese Environmental NGOs* (环保 NGO 的中国生命史) *Southern Weekend* (2009) URL: <http://www.infzm.com/content/35571>

much pollution⁹⁸, but also indirectly by saying they see smog and water pollution as the main issues.⁹⁹ I believe this focus on the visible and local forms of pollution are proof of Wang Yongchen's statement.

One of the departments in GOA is called Department of experiencing nature¹⁰⁰, and the students in this department work directly with organizing group trips to experience nature. They organize regular short trips, to local parks or to some of the mountainous areas of Hangzhou, and once every year they are organizing a tent and hiking trip to a destination that is a bit further away from Zhejiang University. Many of the students I talked with echoed the notion that this trip and this department were very interesting and one of the main reasons for joining the association.¹⁰¹

Rules, Norms and Framing the Environmentalist Lifestyle

The students in GOA all committed to some lifestyle changes as a part of joining the association. Some of the students said they were already living like this before, and that it was not hard for them to make some effort to help the environment, but it still has implications. Some general rules of conduct that most of the students follow are:

- Not ordering take-away,
- Not using the elevator,
- Not throwing trash on the ground,
- Recycle and sort garbage,
- Using public transport,
- Saving water, electricity and other resources.

⁹⁸ Author's translation: "When I was in sixth grade we lived close to a canteen. One day I went to the canteen and I saw all the fish there were dead, just floating on top of the water. Maybe it was because some pesticide had polluted the water in the canteen when the farmers were applying pesticide. This made a deep impression on me. After that I always felt bad and imbalanced inside when I saw something that had been ruined by pollution." ("我小学六年级的时候 那时候我们家门口有一口食堂那时候我去食堂那些鱼都已经死了啊漂浮在水面上。可能是农民打农药的时候把农药污染到食堂里面去了。那一次我觉得印象很深刻。从那时候开始如果看到一些污染破坏的现象的话,自己内心也会有一些感触有一些不平衡") interview 8.

⁹⁹ Author's translation: "Air pollution is the most critical. And water pollution is very critical as well." ("雾霾最严重的。水污染也很严重吧") Interview 11.

¹⁰⁰ (自然体验部)

¹⁰¹ Example of this from one interview: "GOA while doing environmental protection they also have activities for experiencing nature, and i really like that!" ("绿之源做环保的时候同时还有这么一些体验自然的的活动,我觉得非常的好!") Interview 12.

The idea of having this kind of *contract*¹⁰² with the association serves a purpose when it comes to framing activism. This *contract* is saying it is a student's duty to live by these rules for the sake of the environment. Socially constructed duties like these can serve as a way to amplify the severity of the situation and is an important tool for the movement leaders to create a collective identity, and motivate collective action.¹⁰³ These rules also serve another purpose outside of the association. They provide a way to spread environmentalist thought to non-members, and are part of the marketing of the association. By making conscious decisions about everyday life situations, the students will often come across situations in which they act differently than other students. In these situations they will be able to explain why they did what they did, and potentially increase the environmental awareness in of their friends and fellow students. Actions like these are perhaps the most basic step towards keeping environmentalism a public issue, in that it shows its presence. In this case the 'public' will be limited to the university campus however.

Framing as Non-Confrontational

It is evident from my fieldwork that GOA is very non-confrontational towards the government in its strategies. Most of the students I interviewed had never attended any form of western style protest marches or other demonstrations. The main strategies were all related to spreading knowledge about environmentalism and the current environmental problems China is facing. For Chinese ENGOs this non-confrontational attitude is the norm. Instead of fighting against the government and blaming them for the problems, the organizations cooperate with the government in some cases. This is a strategy that is needed in China for the organizations to not be shut down by the government. As soon as organizations become aggressive and confrontational towards the government there is a risk of the organizations not being able to continue its work. According to Taru Salmenkari this is the standard way for NGOs to operate in China, and serves mutually beneficial for the government and the NGOs.

“This accord with the official discourse, often repeated by the NGOs themselves, that NGOs can fill gaps in state-provided service and deliver specific

¹⁰²(契约)

¹⁰³ Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements”, 617-8.

*services to small groups with distinct needs. In this way, they are expected to help reduce social conflict and promote progress.”*¹⁰⁴

Because of the relatively limited space for social organizations to operate in China, they are not in a position where they can directly criticize the government. The way NGOs work around this issue is that it applies a non-confrontational strategy.

Instead of confronting the government, the GOA is collaborating with them when there is potential for mutual benefit. An example of this is one current project where GOA is serving as a so-called “people’s river chief” (民间河长 *minjian hezhang*) for a river running through campus. This river is one of many rivers around Zhejiang the government has decided to clean up. The Zhejiang government and GOA refer to these heavily polluted rivers as black stinky rivers.^{105,106} GOA is not responsible for the actual clean-up, but they are overlooking the work of the other agency that is cleaning the river. They do this by taking additional independent tests of the water quality before and after the clean-up have been done.

Although GOA is not directly confrontational towards the government, many of my interviewees claimed to be impatient and wanted the government to take action, by creating stricter environmental policies, and run campaigns for raising peoples environmental awareness, as they felt government led campaigns had more credibility and were much more far reaching than what the small student association’s campaigns can ever be.¹⁰⁷

Environmentalism as a Public Issue

To show how framing environmentalism with focus on *suzhi*, *nature* and *voluntarism* help make it a public issue I will discuss the terms one at a time. I will also add discussion about other strategies used by the association. As GOA is a very small organization with very limited economy and reach, I will use the concept of a ‘public sphere’ fairly creatively here. I will refer to the area in which the association work as the public, which is mainly inside the university campus, in addition to some areas close by.

¹⁰⁴ Taru Salmenkari, “Encounters between Chinese NGOs and the state: Distance, Roles and Voice” *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 2 (2014): 156.

¹⁰⁵ Author’s translation. (黑臭河)

¹⁰⁶ Lingling Qu, “Hangzhou plans to rehabilitate 47 black stinky rivers this year(…)” URL: <http://www.hangzhou.gov.cn/main/zwdt/bmdt/cj/T491007.shtml>

¹⁰⁷ Finn sitat i intervju.

The concept of *Suzhi* is well known to Chinese people, and framing environmentalism as an issue of *Suzhi* gives people otherwise unfamiliar with environmentalism help with understanding what it is about. When creating a public issue it is important to not limit the issue to only certain parts of the population, so therefore *Suzhi* makes it accessible to everyone. In addition to being available to everybody, having a high *suzhi* is generally viewed as good qualities, so people might want to seek to better their *suzhi*. With the current increase in NGOs and volunteering and charity becoming more popular, using these terms as a way for framing environmental protection is also an efficient way to reach another group of people. It was evident by my fieldwork that the idea of doing charitable work is a fairly standard entry point for many joining the environmental movement. When it comes to the idea of *Nature*, this is also something that the public can relate to. No matter where people are from, they have an idea of nature, and in today's China with extremely many people growing up in cities, many will be interested in experiencing nature first hand. For the people who become members, the rules of conduct are important in that they give provide people with a sense of duty and deeper connection with the association and the movement as a whole. These rules lead to actual change, for example by people consuming less disposable equipment, but more importantly they give the organization another important way to reach out to the public, through the actions of the members. In the small micro-public that is the University of Zhejiang campus, the presence of GOA can be seen in many different ways. Not only in the way they frame their issues, but also in the work they do with organizing garbage sorting programs and other events for everyone to join. By these common concepts when framing environmentalism, GOA makes the organization accessible to almost everybody.

Conclusion

It is clear that environmentalism has reached far into the public sphere in China, and not only on the Zhejiang University campus. Seeing the increased number of times environmental issues are discussed in China's main news outlets, it is clear to see that it is becoming more and more a popular topic.¹⁰⁸ The Chinese interest in environmental problems is shown even better when looking at the massive response on Chai Jing's documentary on air pollution in March 2015, and all the media reports following it. The fact is that environmental issues are already a part of the public sphere, and are very much a public issue. However the ENGOs need to keep working on their projects and keep raising the environmental awareness and education in the Chinese people. For Green Origin Association at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou this is also the case. It is now time to summarize and try to answer the research question of how Chinese university students frame environmentalism to make it a public issue. In the case of GOA, this is done by using a few key concepts that everyone in China can relate to. This is for the sake of not limiting the reach of the organization, and welcoming all kind of people to join. Based on my analysis environmentalism is framed as being high *suzhi*, *charitable* and *close to nature*. The rules of conduct that the members must follow provide the members with an additional sense of community and collectiveness, as well as impact the members' friends and fellow students. Through all the different programs and activities arranged, the association certainly have an influence on campus, and their goal of raising the environmental awareness of their fellow students can be reached, and thus making environmentalism an on-campus public issue.

¹⁰⁸ Yang, "Brokering Environment and Health in China", 106-8.

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