

Environmental disputes in China: A case study of media coverage of the 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest

Global Media and China

2017, Vol. 2(3–4) 303–316

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/2059436417753705

journals.sagepub.com/home/gch**Sibo Chen** 

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Abstract

Environmental disputes have surged in China over the past few years. For many scholars, this trend indicates the proliferation of “Not In My Back Yard” resistance among ordinary Chinese citizens. Yet, to what extent does the “Not In My Back Yard” label accurately reflect the complexity of Chinese environmental activism? This article seeks to address this question through a case study of the 2012 Ningbo anti-para-xylene protest. By analyzing how the event was reported in four news sources (Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, *South China Morning Post*, and Associated Press), the article reveals that while the narratives of domestic sources presented the event as an unfortunate incident caused by irrational citizens, overseas sources presented it as a liberal resistance initiated by China’s rising middle class against an authoritarian government. Both storylines, however, failed to recognize the urban–rural dynamics underlying the protest. Such neglect not only raises concerns regarding the inherent ambiguity of China’s environmental activism but also invites us to think beyond the stereotypical label of “Not In My Back Yard.”

Keywords

China, critical discourse analysis, environmental activism, environmental communication, media discourse, NIMBY

Introduction

Over the past few years, there has been a notable surge of environmental disputes in China. In many cities, residents take to the street to protest new developments in their neighborhoods.

Corresponding author:

Sibo Chen, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, K9671-8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada.

Email: siboc@sfu.ca



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

A common trigger of these protests is local land-use, especially industrial developments with negative environmental and health risks. In 2007, residents in Xiamen, Fujian Province staged a peaceful march against the proposal of a para-xylene (PX) plant in the city. Since then protests have been triggered by similar reasons in other cities such as Nanjing (2008), Dalian (2011), Ningbo (2012), Kunming (2013), and Maoming (2014). Although these protests only received limited domestic coverage due to media censorship, their outbreaks led to periodical surges of anti-PX discussions online, which turned “anti-PX” into an iconic slogan of Chinese environmental activism.

As many scholars have argued (e.g. Gu, 2016; Johnson, 2010; Steinhardt & Wu, 2016), the growing frequency and scale of environmental disputes indicate the proliferation of “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) resistance among ordinary Chinese citizens. While the surge of NIMBY in China can be attributed to a variety of factors including the country’s booming economy, fast-paced urbanization, and growing middle class, from a communication perspective it suggests the persistent lack of public participation in the country’s environmental policymaking. Senecah (2004) proposes that meaningful participatory communication during environmental policymaking requires the formulation of institutional measures to ensure the access, standing, and influence of citizens. In China, however, such measures are often missing or poorly implemented during the planning and construction of industrial utilities. Street protests, in this sense, could be considered as an alternative communication channel strategically adopted by citizens to express their concerns.

Despite a growing recognition of the socio-political impacts of anti-PX protests in China, critical inquiries into their media representations are still in short supply. This article seeks to address this research gap through a case study of the 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest (hereafter as “the Ningbo protest”). The Ningbo protest is arguably the most noteworthy incident of anti-PX resistance in recent years, since it occurred only 2 weeks before the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Based on the framework of argumentative discourse analysis (ADA, Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 2005), the article examines how the protest was reported in four news sources: Xinhua News Agency (XNA), *China Daily* (CD), *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), and Associated Press (AP). By revealing what were emphasized and concealed in these sources’ media narratives, the article seeks to raise concerns regarding the uncritical adoption of the stereotypical NIMBY label in describing Chinese environmental activism. To proceed this argument, the reminder of the article begins with an overview of ADA and its discursive approach to environmental disputes. The article then reviews previous research on the surge of environmental disputes in China. This is followed by the case study of the Ningbo Protest. Finally, the article concludes with a critical assessment of China’s evolving environmental activism.

A discursive approach to the study of environmental disputes

When divergent stakeholders engage in an environmental dispute, the dispute itself often becomes a battleground filled with intense discursive struggles. Discourses actively shape our understanding of environmental issues and their associated problems and solutions. As Hajer (2005) argues, discourse functions as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which social phenomena achieve their meanings. From a social constructivist perspective, discourses are produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of social practices. As “embedded routines and mutually understood rules and norms,” these practices “provide coherence to social life” (Hajer, 2005, p. 302). While discourses are always bound up with politics and power, they can also embody power by conditioning the perceptions and value orientations of their subscribers.

The conflicts between different discourses within environmental disputes have given rise to ADA, a discursive approach to the study of environmental politics. Pioneered by Maarten Hajer (2005), in his analysis of the acid rain controversy in Northern Europe during the 1980s, ADA is developed as an alternative to the realist analysis in environmental politics. Central to ADA is the proposition that “how the definition of a political problem relates to the particular narrative in which it is discussed” (Hajer, 2005, p. 299). In the acid rain case studied by Hajer, the death of large numbers of trees were, of course, not a social construct, but the meaning and affect through which people made sense of those trees were socially defined. Some saw them as the result of “natural stress,” whereas others understood them as victims of air pollution. According to Hajer’s analysis, as the “air pollution” argument gradually gained upper hand in the debate, it further led to the development of the “ecological modernization” discourse. Ecological modernization, as both an environmental discourse and a policy framework, generated significant political and social impacts in Northern Europe and ultimately pushed the region’s national governments into collaborating on the acid rain problem.

Another telling case of discourse’s crucial role in shaping environmental politics is how different interest groups have proposed conflicting storylines concerning climate change (Dryzek, 2013). Originally elaborated as a scientific issue, climate change has been politicalized through domestic and international debates. Climate change’s validity and severity have been questioned by climate deniers, who seek to define it as a hoax by green radicals. On the other side of the spectrum, some radical thinkers consider the current socio-economic system as fundamentally incompatible with the earth’s ecosystem and propose a complete overhaul. For those who believe in climate change but prefer solving the problem in a gradual manner, the problem-solving discourses they adhere to also vary from each other: some propose market as the best mechanism to promote carbon reduction and green consumption, some propose strong top-down administration as the key to constrain irrational and unsustainable economic growth, and some propose “leaving it to the people,” arguing that the lack of deliberative democracy and ecological citizenship brought us to the edge of a total environmental collapse. As Dryzek (2013) summarizes, “the more complex a situation, the larger the number of plausible perspectives upon it—because the harder it is to prove any one of them wrong” (p. 9). In this regard, when an environmental dispute emerges, it often leads to competing narratives in the public sphere. News media, given their important role in mediating public discussions, often become the primary site for such discursive struggles.

There are four key concepts within the framework of ADA: discourse, storyline, metaphor, and discourse coalition. Discourse, as discussed earlier, refers to a shared way of apprehending the world as well as a site of ideological struggle. The concept of storyline refers to “a condensed form of narrative in which metaphors are used” (Hajer, 2005, p. 302). In environmental debates, statements are conveyed through story form. The denial of climate change, for instance, is often delivered through conspiratorial stories that attack scientists, green activists, and environmental groups. As environmental disputes tend to be clouded by scientific details, a primary function of storyline is to generate metaphors that offer “cognitive shortcuts” for public discussions. In Hajer’s (2005) analysis of the acid rain controversy, for instance, the term “acid rain” itself is a metaphor that connects the meteorological phenomenon “acid precipitation” to public’s general fear of acid corrosion. Acid precipitation affects ecosystem in complex ways, not simply like pulling acid on trees. Yet, the powerful symbolic connotations of “acid rain” make it an attention-grabbing issue for policy makers and ordinary citizens. Finally, people subscribing to similar storylines and metaphors may form “discourse coalitions,” in which social actors (re)produce and transform specific discourses. The different discourses concerning climate change, for instance, are subscribed and reproduced by different discourse coalitions.

As the overview shows, ADA shares many similarities with frame analysis (Entman, 2010; Reese, 2007) in media effect research. Both storyline and frame emphasize how semiotic devices meaningfully structure public perceptions of the social world. Yet, compared with frame analysis' focus on how media make some aspects of a perceived reality more salient, ADA primarily explores how a story, with its recurring discursive patterns, is constructed through multiple texts. As Hajer (2005) points out, "the essence of a story is that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (p. 302). Storytelling is a linear process. A story concerning a specific environmental dispute tells us what causes the dispute, the nature of the dispute, who participate in the dispute, and how to solve the dispute. In other words, ADA aims at revealing how an environmental issue is defined by different stakeholders, how these different definitions evolve within constellations of social and political forces, and how these forces can be unified and directed through the formation of discursive coalitions. Accordingly, mapping media discourses on environmental disputes in China not only offers a critical lens to explore how the complexity of China's environmental challenges are represented in news media but also a valuable opportunity to explore the potential of forming different discourse coalitions to address these challenges.

Environmental disputes in China

The role of environmental challenges in shaping political winds in China has been heatedly debated among scholars. In her widely circulated overview of China's environmental crises, Shapiro (2012) considers the tremendous growth of Chinese environmental activism as a direct outcome of citizens' persistent frustration with local governments' inaction on environmental affairs. While a large proportion of such frustration is expressed through environmental organizations that take non-confrontational approaches to mediate state–society relation, there remain numerous protests fueled by localized disputes. According to Johnson (2010), Chinese environmental activism is divided by an "environmentalism versus NIMBY" dichotomy, with the former focusing on "strengthening the institutional environment for more participatory governance," whereas the latter engaging with "immediate concerns regarding unpopular projects" (p. 443). It is the locality of many protests that makes them eligible to be examined under the analytical lens of NIMBY.

Originally conceptualized by environmental planning literature, during the late 1980s, NIMBY describes social opposition to unwanted developments, especially those with perceived negative environmental and health impacts (Burningham, 2000; Schively, 2007). As a complex phenomenon, the dynamics of NIMBY varies from case to case. Freudenberg and Pastor (1992) propose three distinctive ways to look at NIMBY: (1) an ignorant response caused by the lack of scientific knowledge, (2) an irresponsible response driven by self-interested individuals, and (3) a rational response against unfair policymaking. According to this typology, people may join a NIMBY movement for different motivations. The complexity of NIMBY also reveals in the variations found in local protests' target facilities, public perceptions of these protests, and institutional responses to these protests (Schively, 2007). In short, the environmental planning literature emphasizes NIMBY as a phenomenon with both positive and negative attributes. Yet, in North America and Europe, NIMBY's negative connotations with selfishness and ignorance among public discourse often let many activists choose to distance themselves from the label when engaging in local disputes (Burningham, 2000).

In the case of China, previous research on NIMBY has examined its prevalence from a variety of perspectives, including environmental policymaking, civic engagement, political contention, citizen journalism, and cyber activism (e.g. Gu, 2016; Hung, 2013; Johnson, 2010; Liu, 2015; Steinhart &

Wu, 2016; Wong, 2016). While there are notable differences among these perspectives, they all tend to emphasize the positive political implications of NIMBY, especially its enhancement of ordinary citizens' participatory capacity. As Steinhardt and Wu (2016) comment, the new wave of environmental contention in China differs from earlier "mass incidents," during the 1990s, in four dimensions: "broadened protest constituencies, mobilization for public goods, a proactive and preventive strategy, and a mutual reinforcement of street mobilization and policy advocacy" (p. 63). Environmental protests, in this regard, indicate a rising demand for participation in policymaking among China's fledgling middle class. The thesis of Steinhardt and Wu (2016) has been echoed by other studies. For instance, Johnson (2010) recognizes that the "environmentalism versus NIMBY" dichotomy, he proposes, is not a mutually exclusive one: the institutionalization of greater formal public consultation is often achieved by the collaboration of the two sides, and the dynamics of bottom-up resistance is gradually changing the structural dimension of China's environmental governance. Similarly, Wong (2016) sheds light upon how NIMBY activism contributes to environmental policy change in China. In his analysis of anti-incinerator protests in Beijing and Guangzhou, Wong (2016) note that "policy change is not only determined by protest outcomes, but that it is also greatly affected by the responses of local governments and actors within a framework of advocacy coalition" (p. 143). NIMBY, in this sense, functions as an ice breaker for initiating government–public dialog. The outcomes of NIMBY can vary from case to case. Viewing from the perspective of government responses, Gu (2016) argues that the outcomes of NIMBY resistance are determined by China's divided state power: local governments tend to make concessions in fear of political escalation and intervention from the central government.

Emphasizing government–protestor dynamics, however, only depicts one aspects of NIMBY in China. As revelations of political contentions in contemporary China, public protests are newsworthy events that draw both domestic and oversea media attention. As domestic coverage on these protests is often operated in a confusing "half-light," protesters often seek to broadcast their voices through new media. Studies like Hung (2013) and Liu (2015), for instance, have emphasized the contributions of alternative information online and digitally mediated political contention in generating mutual engagement and enhancing political consciousness among protesters. In response to the prevalence of new media, China's state-affiliated media are forced to provide official narratives to compete with online voices and foreign commentators. Such discursive struggles are especially evident in the realm of international communication. To ensure its vantage point in the current global power shifts, China has made tremendous efforts on cultivating its soft power (Lee, 2016). A central strategy of such efforts is to tell Chinese stories that challenge Western media's stereotypical depictions of China. Given the extent to which China has been criticized for its environmental degradation, China's state-affiliated media have gradually shifted away from its previous passive approach to environmental issues. For instance, during the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, both *CD* and *People's Daily* provided feature reports that promoted the Chinese government's determination in promoting "ecological civilization" and criticized Western governments' unfair dominance in determining global CO₂ deduction scheme (Chen, in press). Thus, when an environmental dispute such as the Ningbo protest occurs, China's state-affiliated media are expected to compete with Western media for the high ground of public opinions within the global press sphere.

Methodology

Between 23 and 28 October 2012, residents of Ningbo, Zhejiang Province marched on the streets to protest the proposed construction of a CNY55.9 billion (approx. US\$8.9 billion) chemical plant

in Zhenhai, a rural town only 7.5 km away from the urban area. The protest was triggered by health and environmental concerns since the chemical plant, once completed, would emit PX, an aromatic hydrocarbon that can cause a series of negative impacts, such as headache, fatigue, and dizziness. The protest received significant and immediate attention on the Chinese Internet and created mounting public pressure on the Ningbo municipal government. On 29 October, the Ningbo municipal government announced that the project was permanently suspended due to public opposition.

Like other public protests in China, the Ningbo protest only received limited domestic media coverage and related discussions were censored online. For more than 1 month following the protest, terms such as “Ningbo,” “Zhenhai,” and “Zhenhai chemical plant” were blocked in SINA Weibo (China’s most popular microblog platform). Nonetheless, as the protest occurred only 2 weeks before the Communist Party of China’s 18th National Congress, in which Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as the Party’s General Secretary, China’s state-affiliated media were forced to compete with foreign media to downplay the protest’s negative political impacts. As competing narratives concerning the Ningbo protest prevailed within the global press sphere, they offered an excellent opportunity to explore ideological conflicts underlying Chinese environmental activism.

Using the search term, “Ningbo protest,” in the LexisNexis database, this study collected news report samples from four sources: XNA, CD, SCMP, and AP. These news sources were chosen as representatives of the major news agencies influencing media portrayals of China. Both XNA and CD are expressive of the Chinese government’s official stance and, consequently, play determinative roles in news frame construction and agenda-setting in the media landscape of Mainland China. XNA is China’s official press agency and its biggest center for the collection and distribution of news information. CD is the most circulated English-language newspaper in China and it plays a key role in cultivating China’s national image and articulating the government’s politics and concerns to the English-speaking community both domestically and abroad. By comparison, the news reports published by SCMP and AP represent more liberal and critical perspectives on Chinese domestic affairs. SCMP is the first English-language newspaper in Hong Kong with a pronounced status in Hong Kong’s news media system. Located in New York City, AP provides news stories for around 1400 US daily newspapers and thousands of televisions and radio broadcasts, which makes it one of the most important news agencies in the world.

The period for data collection was set between 15 October and 15 November 2012, which corresponded to the days leading to the protest, its climax, and its immediate aftermath. Using the term “Ningbo protest,” I searched news reports published by the four news sources in the LexisNexis database. A total of 16 news reports were collected, as shown in Table 1. The modest data size was expected given the short duration of the protest. It was impossible for these reports to provide an exhaustive summary of the protest, but they still offer valuable insights into the dominant news frames used to discuss the incident.

The collected reports were analyzed following the framework of ADA. As discussed earlier, ADA primarily focuses on examining how recurring discursive patterns across multiple texts consolidate into different storylines and how these storylines shape and are shaped by different discursive coalitions. In the case of the Ningbo protest, the ideological differences between domestic and overseas media divided them into two discourse coalitions. Accordingly, the analysis of the collected reports sought to explore how storytelling drew a clear discursive boundary between the two sides. For this purpose, the collected reports were analyzed according to the following steps. First, the analysis scrutinized the collected reports for prominent “background stories” before the outbreak of

Table 1. The collected news reports for the Ningbo protest.

		Report title
<i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	2	Eastern China city defends chemical plant after protests (24 October) China focus: CPC pledges to give the public more say (12 November)
<i>China Daily</i>	3	Projects urged more transparent on environment info (5 November) Projects face greater checks (13 November) The future is green (26 November)
<i>South China Morning Post</i>	6	Chemical plant protesters keep up pressure (25 October) Scuffles as 1000 protest over chemical plants (28 October) Ningbo protests against growth at any cost (30 October) Vow to halt plant expansion met with skepticism (30 October) Rising activism poses challenge (31 October) Public interest litigation is in everyone's best interest (8 November)
<i>Associated Press</i>	5	China residents protest chemical factory expansion (27 October) Protests over chemical factory resume in China (28 October) Tensions mount as police grab protesters in China (28 October) China steps carefully with protesting middle class (29 October) Chinese protest factory even after official pledge (29 October)
Total	16	

the Ningbo protest. Then, the analysis examined how the Ningbo protest was discursively constructed in the reports. Given ADA's focus on storytelling, the reports were analyzed in terms of their definitions of the protests, depictions of principle actors, and proposed solutions. Finally, based on the findings of the previous steps, the analysis ended by identifying and evaluating the overall storylines built by the reports.

Before the protest: contextual information and basic facts

As mentioned earlier, the anti-PX movement is arguably the most influential stream of environmental protests in China. Originating from the 2007 Xiamen anti-PX protest, citizens have rallied under the "anti-PX" banner and protested the proposed construction of PX plants in or near their neighborhoods. Table 2 summarizes major anti-PX protests between 2007 and 2014. Most of these protests ended up with concession on the part of local governments, which made anti-PX a very sensitive topic for many Chinese officials. As AP noted shortly after the Ningbo Protest, "in the compromises of recent years, the outlines of an unspoken protest compact have emerged: keep the demonstrations peaceful and focus largely on local issues, and the backlash will be minimal" (China steps carefully with protesting middle class, AP, 29 October 29 2012).

The anti-PX movement represents an increasingly common scenario across China: a Chinese city, a massive protest, and a wave of online attention. It is important to understand the radical unfolding of these disputes in China's broader social and political contexts. One popular narrative that has circulated in these protests is the story of a corrupt local government that works together with ruthless capitalists, suppress ordinary citizens and lie to the central government. The "bad local government versus good central government" dichotomy resonates with a common narrative in Chinese popular culture: before 2004, TV dramas on high-profile anti-corruption cases were extremely popular among domestic viewers. A common plotline in these dramas involved the

Table 2. Major anti-PX protests in China.

Year	Place
2007	Xiamen, Fujian Province
2008	Nanjing, Jiangsu Province
2011	Dalian, Liaoning Province
2012	Ningbo, Zhejiang Province
2013	Kunming, Yunnan Province
2014	Maoming, Guangdong Province

PX: para-xylene.

discipline and punishment of ruthless local officials at the hands of good officials from the central government.¹ When this dichotomy is adopted for public understanding of environmental disputes, it facilitates people to make sense of them in a simplified, yet emotional way. Many people oppose the construction of PX projects in their neighborhoods, since they believe that corrupt local governments and ruthless capitalists inevitably receive the economic benefits from these projects, whereas ordinary people always suffer from the pollution.

Besides the historical and political legacies of the anti-PX movement, the time and location are also crucial for understanding the dynamics of Ningbo protest. The protest occurred only 2 weeks before the Party's 18th National Congress. Consequently, it immediately received domestic as well as international attention, since "such incidents illustrate the social tensions confronting the central government as it approaches its once-in-a-decade leadership transition" ("scuffles as 1,000 protest over chemical plants," SCMP, 28 October 2012). With stability being paramount during this politically sensitive period, social unrest was highly undesirable from the perspective of the Chinese leadership.

As a coastal city with convenient sea transportation and adjacent to Shanghai, Ningbo has a long-time engagement with the chemical industry. Surrounded by several industry development zones, the Zhenhai district suffered a rising death rate associated with cancer-related diseases, which was a subject of major concern for locals even before the protest started. "Zhenhai was transformed into a petrochemical base in 1970s, but over the past several years, there are more chemical plants moving in, which led to an increase in cancer and birth defects," writes AP ("chemical plant protesters keep up pressure," AP, 25 October 2012). The introduction of the PX plant, in this regard, served as "the final straw that breaks the camel's back."

Taken together, the impacts of the Ningbo protest could be understood in terms of its unique time and location and its connection with the nationwide anti-PX movement. These factors led to the Chinese government's imposition of strict censorship as well as the "liberal resistance" storyline advanced by oversea media. A general survey of the collected news reports reveals the following basic facts: a variety of demonstrations occurred on Ningbo's streets between 23 and 28 October 2012. According to the reports, the primary reason for these protests was that many Ningbo residents worried that the construction of the PX plant would cause serious pollution and many believed that the Ningbo government did not properly assess the project's environmental impacts. The protest originated from a small-scale protest in nearby Zhenhai County in which local peasants sought increased compensation from the local government. As the news regarding the PX plant spread among Ningbo residents, it triggered larger street demonstrations on 27 and 28 October, in the urban area. Further details of the demonstrations, however, are difficult to verify given the

conflicting accounts offered by different media outlets. According to XNA and CD, the protests were peaceful and few violent incidents occurred. By contrast, SCMP and AP reported that the Ningbo government had to rely on riot police and arrest hundreds of protestors to stabilize the situation.

Reporting the protest: two conflicting storylines

This analysis revealed two conflicting storylines concerning the Ningbo protest. While SCMP and AP praised the protest as a “liberal resistance” led by China’s rising middle class, XNA and CD defended the Chinese government by addressing the protest as an “unfortunate incident” participated by “irrational citizens.” Digging a little deeper, the two storylines contrast each other in the following aspects.

To begin with the overseas coverage, the reports by SCMP and AP put the protestors at the central spot, as shown in titles such as “protests over chemical factory resume in China” (AP, 28 October 2012) and “tensions mount as police grab protesters in China” (AP, 28 October 2012). When describing social actors involved in the protest, these reports also blurred the line between “residents” and “protestors.” According to their coverage, the Ningbo protest was supported by a variety of social classes, especially the middle class, who bravely led the demonstrations with the assistance of new media technologies (e.g. mobile communication and SINA Weibo). By emphasizing the protest’s large scale and the democratic nature of its anti-PX demand, these reports suggested what happened in Ningbo was a “liberal resistance” initiated by China’s rise middle class:

Thousands of people in an eastern Chinese city clashed with police during a protest over the proposed expansion of a petrochemical factory [. . .] It was the latest in a string of protests in China this year over fears of health risks from industrial projects, as members of the rising middle class become more outspoken against environmentally risky projects in their areas. (“China residences protest chemical factory expansion,” AP, 27 October 2012, emphasis added)

The Ningbo municipal government and its police force, by contrast, were portrayed as villains within the “liberal resistance” storyline. As most of the reports by XNA and CD were published during the climax of the protest (27 and 28 October), they naturally focused on specific details of the protest, such as the scale of the demonstrations, the clashes between the police and the protestors, and the censored discussions on SINA Weibo. The vivid descriptions of the protest’s chaotic nature, in turn, emphasized the polarization between the Ningbo government and the protestors:

Demonstrators clashed with riot police in central Ningbo yesterday, as protests against the proposed expansion of a Sinopec plant drew the largest crowds yet. Scuffles were reported outside the city government headquarters and in the central Tianyi Square, where more than a thousand turned up to air concerns about pollution from the oil refinery and chemical plant expansion in the Zhejiang province seaport. [. . .] Protesters began gathering at Tianyi Square at around 9am, carrying banners and chanting slogans. Later, they assembled outside the government headquarters. Some wore glasses and masks to protect against tear gas and shouted: “[We] would rather be beaten to death than poisoned to death.” One witness told the Sunday Morning Post that many protestors had been taken away by the police. “An increasing number of anti-riot policemen have arrived at the scene, and they’re all well equipped,” he said. Police blocked roads to the city center and the Zhenhai district, where the plants are located, in an effort to prevent more from joining the rally. Protesters complained they were unable to post photos online after

microblogging services were suspended. (Scuffles as 1000 protest over chemical plants, SCMP, 28 October 2012)

As the Ningbo Protest ended with the Ningbo government's concession, both SCMP and AP concluded the "liberal resistance" storyline by describing it as a call for environmental protection and democracy. By speculating the protest's potential impacts on the upcoming 18th National Congress, they also propose that China's rising middle class, with their growing political consciousness, would pose a political challenge to the incoming leaders:

The protest in Ningbo—a centuries-old trading center of tree-lined streets and canals south of Shanghai now surrounded by industrial development zones—was well-timed. It came a few weeks before a transfer of power in the ruling Communist Party, and Beijing wants calm nationwide so as not to detract from the leadership transition. [. . .] The protests underscore the challenge the incoming leaders face in governing an increasingly wealthy—and wired—population who are growing more assertive about issues they care about. Democratic movements in places such as South Korea and Taiwan started with the middle class, and in Taiwan's case environmental issues featured prominently. ("China steps carefully with protesting middle class," AP, 29 October 2012, emphasis added)

In short, the "liberal resistance" storyline by SCMP and AP, like many other negative coverage on political repression in China, depicted the rebellion of China's rising middle class against an authoritarian government. This storyline presented a politically unstable scenario in Ningbo and criticized the Chinese government by elaborating the connection between China's environmental activism and political uncertainty.

To compete with the "liberal resistance" storyline and its discursive power, the reports by XNA and CD constructed a storyline that presented the Ningbo protest as an "unfortunate incident" caused by "irrational citizens." The domestic headlines intentionally avoided addressing what occurred in Ningbo as a public protest. In fact, the word "protest/protestor" only appeared once (i.e. "Eastern China city defends chemical plant after protests," XNA, 24 October 2012) in the titles from XNA and CD. The "public incident" label was persistent throughout their coverage, which suggested China's official definition of the event.

The reports by XNA and CD made a further distinction between ordinary Ningbo residents and those who went on the streets, which demonized the protest action and created a perception of "internal enemies among the public." For instance, one commentary article from XNA explicitly criticized the irrational behavior during the protest via a statement from the Zhenhai district government, in which the protestors' illegal actions were condemned:

Nearly 200 local residents protested outside the district government's offices on Monday over safety and pollution fears [. . .] The district government has promised to resettle villagers who have had to relocate because of the expansion, as well as threatened punishment for a "very small number of people who were involved in instigating, making up rumors and organizing illegal activities." ("East China city defends chemical plant after protests," XNA, 24 October 2012, emphasis added)

In terms of the Ningbo municipal government, both XNA and CD avoided addressing the Ningbo municipal government's reactions to the protestors. Alleged violent clashes between armed police and protestors occurring on 27 and 28 October, for instance, were absent from their reports. Instead, their reports spent much more time discussing the "lessons" taught by the public incident and citing statements of key officials from provincial and national governments, who expressed the

government's apparent willingness to cope with the rising "environmental consciousness" of ordinary citizens.

As most reports by XNA and CD were published after the protest's dramatic ending, the protest was primarily discussed as background information, an unfortunate event that had already occurred. The major points discussed in these reports were the "lessons" learnt from the unpleasant conflict and how to avoid similar incidents in the future. As such, these reports tried to alleviate the negative political impacts of the protest by framing the Ningbo protest as a historical (rather than contemporary) event. The adoption of a commentary narrative style turned the protest into background information with very little detail. In the following excerpt, for instance, the discussion primarily focused on the circular released by the Ministry of Environmental Protection:

The Ministry of Environmental Protection released a circular this week urging local authorities to be more transparent when providing information related to the environment, especially data regarding potentially hazardous construction projects. In cases of major projects that may involve the public's vital interests, information should be disclosed to a wider spectrum of people and decisions should be made after listening to public comments, the circular said. The circular is a reminder to local governments of the importance of releasing clear and accurate information in avoiding social disturbances. And it comes after a protest last week against the expansion of a petrochemical plant in East China's Ningbo city, which prompted the government to suspend the project. (Projects urged more transparency on environment info, CD, 5 November 2012, emphasis added)

Overall, the "unfortunate incident" storyline constructed by XNA and CD admitted the inadequacy of transparency during the review of the PX project and the need for environmental considerations in China's future economic development. Yet, it also failed to systemically assess the Ningbo municipal government's authoritarian policy-making procedure. In this sense, the storyline suggested that "greening China" requires no radical change of the existing economic and political structures.

The analyzed news reports showed no observable involvement of Sinopec (the state-owned corporation proposing the PX project) and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), during the protest. This was quite interesting given that both corporations and NGOs often become visible actors during other environmental disputes (e.g. the smog hazard in Beijing). Sinopec's absence may be attributed to its consideration of the unknown political risks for involvement. Meanwhile, Chinese environmental NGOs' silence (at least publicly) insisted on their non-confrontational stance. These GOs must constantly struggle to maintain their legitimacy by, in large part, ensuring they are cooperative partners with local governments. As such, for them, involvement in demonstrations like the Ningbo protest presents a serious political risk.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has sought to shed light upon the ideological differences between domestic and international media in their coverage of the Ningbo protest. As shown in the above analysis, China's state-affiliated media constructed the "unfortunate incident" storyline to compete with overseas media's "liberal resistance" storyline in the global press sphere. Both storylines, however, are problematic from an environmental justice perspective. The "liberal movement" frame largely defines the Ningbo protest as a middle-class rebellion. The validity of this diagnosis is questionable given the difficulty to verify the actual social class structure of the Ningbo protesters. To some extent, this

view has generalized China's class struggles from a Western-centric perspective, translating China's environmental politics into a simple democratic resistance frame. As mentioned in the "Before the protest" section, the large-scale demonstrations in urban Ningbo followed the small-scale protest by peasants living in Zhenhai. The middle-class interpretation is contradicted by these rebellious peasants. Moreover, even when the protest later spread to the Ningbo city and became large-scale street demonstrations, the social class of the protesters was never explicitly described in the collected news reports. Finally, another issue troubling the "middle-class" label is the concept's inherent ambiguity in China's stratified socio-economy: who can be confidently defined as middle class, university students anxious about job market, young workers suffering from sky-rocking housing cost, or retired workers with uncertain future due to China's market reforms?

Meanwhile, the "unfortunate incident" frame, besides its questionable propaganda purpose, also fails to acknowledge the severe environmental injustice between urban and rural China. Indeed, as the rise of environmentalism in China's urban areas are driving more and more polluting industries to China's rural areas, China's rural areas will continue to suffer from environmental damage caused by unfair distribution in the foreseeable future. In many ways, the original attempt by the Ningbo government to locate the PX plant in Zhenhai was a compromise to urban residents. It is sad to see the peasants in Zhenhai, whose actions initiated the entire movement, all disappeared from the news when massive urban protest in Ningbo broke out. Incidents like the Ningbo protest are likely to continue until the urban–rural gap in China has been properly recognized and addressed. As such, constructing the Ningbo protest as an "unfortunate incident" not only conceals existing problems in China's industrialization process but also sows unstable seeds for the future.

The silencing of the peasant class in both domestic and foreign news is deeply problematic, as it sends a clear signal that the peasant class is "unimportant" in China's environmental transformation. Such neglect also points to the potential risks of uncritically adopting of the stereotypical NIMBY label in describing China's environmental activism. In the Ningbo case, both domestic and international media implies the residents' concerns were voiced through a NIMBY framework, with domestic sources emphasizing the protest's irrationality and international sources emphasizing its enhancement of participatory capacity. This approach fits the Ningbo protest into a more conventional narrative describing how economic wealth will ultimately be translated into political power/concern. Such labeling, however, should be cautiously interpreted. Nevertheless, the NIMBY label actual misrepresented the concerns of Zhenhai residents, who, while struggling with the health and environmental impacts of Ningbo's chemical industry, did not come to the attention of Ningbo residences when the risks was far from the urban district. Yet, when Ningbo's chemical industry finally came into public scrutiny, the original calls of peasants in Zhenhai were displaced by the desires of affluent urban residents in Ningbo. In short, describing the Ningbo protest through a NIMBY framework misrepresents the interests of Zhenhai residents, who initiated the protest but were eventually harmed by it since the suspension of the PX project (which then shut down public scrutiny) made it even more difficult for them to be compensated to leave the already polluted industrious area.

Indeed, the media depictions of the Ningbo protest are full of contradictions and biases. Defining the protest as a "middle class revolution" fits the grand narrative of China's elite class, as well as Western capitalism, since such a "revolution" is a call for western democracy, life style, and environmental regulations. By positioning the middle class in the central position of environmental movements in China, news discourse re-affirms the logic of westernization behind China's reforms. The "middle class environmentalism" interpretation serves as a powerful narrative affirming the

developmental logic of Western society. Yet, it reflects a problematic trend that environmentalism in China tends to be structured together with neoliberal arguments: the expansion of capitalism and the growth of the middle class are simply regarded as common sense. Such framing represents a highly liberal model of environmental politics, which neglects the justice-based perspective that are, in many respects, the driving force behind China's environmental politics.

Nevertheless, this biased discourse is problematic and unstable. The fundamental ideology lying behind it is an urban-centric view of China's social development, intersecting with elitist views of China's past, present, and future. If this ideology continues to dominate the mainstream of China's environmental politics, China's lower classes will, once again, be sacrificed during China's environmental transformation.


Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. Shane Gunster and Dr. Yuezhi Zhao for their constructive feedback during the conceptualization of the project. I am also grateful for the insightful comments offered by two anonymous reviewers and the help provided by Global Media and China's editorial team.

Funding

This research was conducted with the support of the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship.

ORCID iD

Sibo Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0693-9046>

Note

1. In 2004, The State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) of China put forward a regulation that prohibited the broadcast of TV dramas based on "criminal or anti-corruption cases" during prime time. This ban was lifted recently due to Xi's anti-corruption campaign.

References

- Burningham, K. (2000). Using the language of NIMBY: A topic for research, not an activity for researchers. *Local Environment*, 5, 55–67.
- Chen, S. (in press). Environmental journalism in China: Challenges and prospects. In J. Lewis & B. Brevini (Eds.), *Climate change and the media*, volume II. New York: Peter Lang.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2013). *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Entman, R. M. (2010). Framing media power. In P. D'Angelo & J. A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 331–355). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freudenberg, W., & Pastor, S. (1992). NIMBYs and LULUs, stalking the syndromes. *Journal of Social Issues*, 48, 9–61.
- Gu, H. (2016). NIMBY in China: Issues and prospects of public participation in facility siting. *Land Use Policy*, 52, 527–534.
- Hajer, M. A. (2005). Coalitions, practices, and meaning in environmental politics: From acid rain to BSE. In D. Howarth & J. Torfing (Eds.), *Discourse theory and European politics* (pp. 299–315). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hung, C. (2013). Citizen journalism and cyberactivism in China's anti-PX plant in Xiamen, 2007–2009. *China: An International Journal*, 11, 40–54.
- Johnson, T. (2010). Environmentalism and NIMBY in China: Promoting a rules-based approach to public participation. *Environmental Politics*, 19, 430–448.

- Lee, S. N. (2016). The rise of China and its contest for discursive power. *Global Media and China*, 1(1–2), 102–120.
- Liu, J. (2015). Communicating beyond information? Mobile phones and mobilization to offline protests in China. *Television & New Media*, 16, 503–520.
- Reese, S. D. (2007). The framing project: A bridging model for media research revisited. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 148–157.
- Schively, C. (2007). Understanding the NIMBY and LULU phenomena: Reassessing our knowledge base and informing future research. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 21, 255–266.
- Senecah, S. (2004). The trinity of voice: The role of practical theory in planning and evaluating the effectiveness of environmental participatory processes. In S. P. Depoe, J. W. Delicath, & M. A. Elsenbeer (Eds.), *Communication and public participation in environmental policymaking* (pp. 13–33). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Shapiro, J. (2012). *China's environmental challenges*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Steinhardt, H., & Wu, F. (2016). In the name of the public: Environmental protest and the changing landscape of popular contention in China. *The China Journal*, 75, 61–82.
- Wong, N. W. M. (2016). Environmental protests and NIMBY activism: Local politics and waste management in Beijing and Guangzhou. *China Information*, 30, 143–164.

Author biography

Sibo Chen is SSHRC Vanier Doctoral Fellow in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. His research interests include environmental communication, critical discourse analysis, political economy, and energy-society relationship. He is currently working on his PHD dissertation on public debates about Canada's fossil fuel sector.