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Soft confrontation: Strategic actions of an environmental organization in China

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Introduction

The increasingly complex and extensive existence of environmental problems in China has made environmental protection a public issue that concerns almost everybody. In China, despite the obstacles to the existence of a truly independent civil society, environmental organizations have been playing important roles in environmental governance, from promoting environmental education to initiating environmental campaigns. Moreover, as representatives of the public interest, environmental organizations have also formed a crucial bridge for public participation in environmental matters in China (Yang 2005). However, differing from most civil society organizations in the Western world which can freely participate in street protests and political demonstrations, organizations in China have to restrain their actions within government tolerable limits. In China, environmental organizations have generally chosen to act in a form of “embedded activism” (Ho 2007) in the semi-authoritarian context, facing mixed signals and political ambivalence regarding public participation (Stern and O’Brien 2012; Stern 2013). In other words, their activities have been in line with government policies, and their framing and tactics are generally depoliticized and collaborative. Environmental organizations in China also have close relationships with government institutions. This is reflected in the official

registration requirement for civil organizations in China to be affiliated with a supervising parent institution, such as a public institution or a government agency (Hildebrandt 2011). As Ho (2001) argued, environmentalism in China, encompassing the various forms of green NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) that we see in the West and the ex-socialist states of Eastern and Central Europe, is different in its reluctance to openly confront the government. Hence, are Chinese organizations merely collaborating with the government in compromising and non-confrontational ways?

In this chapter, we analyze the strategies adopted by Green Hunan, a local environmental volunteers' organization in Hunan Province, China, and propose "soft confrontation" (柔性抗争 *rouxing kangzheng*) as a new concept to critically examine actions and strategies of environmental organizations in China. The case of Green Hunan shows that organizations can adopt measures that are both collaborative and confrontational for the sake of environmental protection. Adapting soft strategies (Chakib 2014) such as media campaign and lobbying instead of hard ones such as environmental protests and road blocking, Green Hunan has maintained its legitimacy in its fight for the environment and the public interest. Yet, in an authoritarian state, using soft strategies such as disseminating information to create public outcry can be considered confrontational as well. Instead of being oppositional or radical, the confrontation is persistent yet resilient, reflecting its particular ways of interacting with the local government against China's restrictive political background, as we will illustrate in the following section.

Earlier studies on environmental civil society in China mainly focused on organizations that have obtained more social resources – either established in Beijing or with official state-acknowledged backgrounds – such as Friends of Nature, Global Village, and Green Earth Volunteers (Yang 2005). The action strategies that such organizations have taken generally include conflict aversion, cooperation seeking, building relationships, and media support (Yang and Calhoun 2007). However, elite organizations with rich social resources and official support are undeniably only a small part of the thousands of environmental organizations in China. A large majority of environmental organizations are still seeking official collaborations and trying to obtain social resources by adopting various actions and strategies.

In contrast to studies that focus on widely reported environmental campaigns such as anti-dam movements (Lin 2007) or environmental organizations with rich resources, in this chapter we extend studies of Chinese environmental organizations from national campaigns and policy consultation to the everyday activities of a local organization. By examining the daily environmental protection activities carried out by Green Hunan – a small to medium-sized local environmental

organization in Hunan Province – we have found that, by using two major strategies of “pushback” (倒逼 *Daobi*) and negotiation (协商 *Xieshang*), the environmental organization has carried out a form of soft confrontation to protect the environmental public interest within a restrained political space and with limited resources. Green Hunan uses the media as a platform and pushback as a strategy to attract government attention and thus forms an inter-dependable relationship between itself and the government. During the process of using soft strategies such as reporting and negotiating with the government, Green Hunan also continues with the strategy of pushback in order to maintain its power of being confrontational, thus achieving a balance of dependency and autonomy.

The completion of this chapter is a collaboration between the two authors, and the theoretical framework of soft confrontation was debated and developed by both authors. Xinhong Wang wrote the theoretical framework, literature review, and sociological analysis and Yuanni Wang conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with workers and volunteers of Green Hunan, including interviews with four NGO workers and 17 volunteers, in addition to participation observation and informal talks. In July 2014, Yuanni Wang started volunteering as a river guardian at Green Hunan. Between July 2015 and February 2017, while continuing to volunteer, she also acted as staff worker responsible for the organization’s culture construction. The research focused on organizational strategies for collective action and their overall purposes and effects. All interviews, talks, and participatory observation were recorded in extensive research notes, on file with the authors.

Nine dragons: The dilemma of reporting environmental pollution

Green Hunan is a local environmental public interest organization that was officially registered in 2011 in Hunan Province, China. Consisting of volunteers from various cities and towns in Hunan Province, the organization aims to promote ecological protection in the province through continuously and effectively encouraging local government to rectify environmental problems. One of the major environmental actions carried out by the organization is River Watchers, a project where volunteers of the organization are trained to monitor the four major rivers in Hunan by spotting sewage pollution, using simple water quality inspection packets, citizen photography, and information dissemination. When finding abnormal emission problems in the river, the volunteers call government hotlines, take samples for testing, use online social media to disseminate information, and also request the government to disclose relevant information.

Pollution reporting is one important channel for citizens to contribute to environmental governance in China. However, volunteers have found that the effect of using the reporting channel is very limited. As one interviewee explained:

It was in 2012. I went fishing with my friend and found that the river nearby was running different colours and polluted. Then I started to make phone calls to report it. But it was not really useful, so I wrote to the provincial Governor. After writing the letter, it had some effect. Some local government officials contacted me and agreed that we could visit the sewage spot together. When we went there, we did not find any pollution problem. However a few days later, I went there again and noticed the pollution again. I also called the reporting hotline, but still nobody responded to tackle the issue.

Generally, the routine reporting method rarely leads to effective results. This is due not only to the collusion of local government and enterprises (Zhang 2006; Long and Hu 2014), but also to the complexity of environmental problems and the division of government departmental responsibilities. As another participant remarked:

I often call 12369 or 12345 to report pollution issues, but reporting has little effect. Sometimes when we find pollution emission, people on the other end of the phone say that it was not the responsibility of the Environmental Protection Bureau, but of the Water Department. When we called the Water Department, they would say that it was not their work, and we should call other government offices. It is so difficult to report environmental problems. Then, even if you feel that your report went through, it is a different issue whether it will have an effect or not.

Chinese people use the term “Nine dragons controlling water” (九龙治水 *Jiulong zhishui*) to describe their current chaotic water management system. That is, with multiple government agencies being responsible for managing the water quality and usage, there is no consistent and well-coordinated water management system. This has also contributed to the failure of using official reporting channels. Facing these problems, volunteers have to seek other strategies to find effective solutions to environmental problems.

“Making bigger” and “pushing back”

According to Xie and Dang (2015), due to the unsatisfactory government responsibility system, the public has to utilize both government and social

resources to create external public opinion and cause internal pressure to push local governments to fulfill their responsibility. “Making bigger” (闹大 *Naoda*) – to arouse public opinion and put pressure upon government – is usually the method volunteers take when they find that official routine channels do not work. In October 2011, for example, during their routine monitoring, volunteers found that a sewage exit in Xiang River was emitting a large amount of polluted water. They called the government reporting hotlines and also took photos and samples as evidence. However, the local government did not respond or take any other corresponding action as required by law. Volunteers came back to the pollution location several times and found the problem was still there. They were worried because the river was upstream of a drinking water source for millions of residents. To push for government reaction, they started to make the issue bigger and louder. First, they initiated a Nightingale Action to attract media attention and arouse public concern. As one interviewee explained: “A nightingale is a bird that sings at night. We monitor Xiang River at night and use new media to ‘shout loud’ its environmental problem, just like the nightingale sings at night. Thus we name our actions – environmental monitoring, attracting public concern and creating public opinion to make government take actions – ‘Nightingale Action.’”

Volunteers made their plans to hype up the issue online and offline, while emphasizing that all actions must conform to their principle of “standing opposite the government, but not against it.” In other words, their target is the environmental problem but not the government. Additionally, volunteers also agreed to maintain objectivity and avoid using radical and critical words that might offend the government. Generally, environmental pollution victims focus more on individual and group damages compensations, thus they are likely to point directly to the polluting enterprises and local governments, and disclose their accomplices to appeal for public attention and empathy. In contrast, civil environmental organizations aim to push the local government to solve environmental problems and safeguard public environmental interests. Therefore, environmental organizations act differently from individuals who fight for their interests by any means. In China, in order for an organization to persist and work toward its causes, it is crucial to avoid any type of opposition against the government.

Since enterprises do not discharge their polluted water at specific times, volunteers initiated a 24-hour continuous monitoring plan on 8 December to obtain the evidence on site and in time. They stayed at the pollution site and took samples every two hours to be tested in a professional lab. At around 8.30 p.m., after almost 20 hours of continuous monitoring, volunteers found that the sewage spot started to discharge dark and foul-smelling waste water. To show

their respect to the local government, and also to comply with their principle, volunteers first called the local environmental protection bureau and hoped that they would send people to investigate. However, this did not work. Therefore, volunteers started to pin their hope on online “hyping up.” They published photos and messages with the hashtag *Nightingale Action* on Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese online social media platforms, to disseminate the polluting situation. At the same time, they also used the theme *Our Mother River Cannot Bear It* to launch the campaign on various other social forums. By doing this, they aimed to arouse public environmental consciousness and create common resonance and thus make the issue a public concern. To maintain the issue as a hot topic online and create sufficient public opinion in the online public space, volunteers continuously posted, commented, and forwarded messages on various social media.

After volunteers widely disseminated their concerns on the Internet, many people started to join the campaign. On the first day after the Weibo post, more than 100 online users forwarded the original post of the emission pollution to express their support. Some comments reflected people’s anger toward enterprises and government. Some online users also relayed the information to relevant media or provincial government officials. In print media, several local newspapers, including *Hunan Daily* and *Sanxiang Metropolitan Daily*, reported on the environmental pollution issue after noticing that it had caused public attention. The involvement of traditional media made the campaign more authoritative. On one hand, this further fermented public opinion, and on the other, it attracted government attention. Under the pressure of public opinion created by both new and traditional media, on 10 December the Provincial Environmental Department and the local Environmental Protection Bureau formed an investigation team. That very night, the local Environmental Protection Bureau published their investigation result and its polluter liability decision. Most important of all, local government officials also began their communications with volunteers. The government expressed that they would respond immediately if volunteers reported similar issues in the future.

Through rational “making bigger,” volunteers not only gained public support and trust, but also social capital to interact with local government. This has become a cutting point for environmental volunteers to have an equal footing to confront the local government.

Negotiation rather than cooperation

The actions of the environmental volunteers have also received official acknowledgment. In 2013, the organization received several awards: CCTV (China Central Television) rule of law model, Hunan Province Learning from Leifeng Excellent Prize for Volunteer Service, and the *Morning News Weekly* City Dream Award. These awards have granted the organization the status of Xiang River Protector, and, more importantly, provided it more space and resources for its survival and development. Furthermore, this made it possible for the organization and volunteers to initiate negotiation with the government. “Since we won the award from the central government, more and more people started to know us,” explained one participant. “Our contact with the provincial government has become more frequent. The provincial government also started to give us awards and established official Green Guardians, aiming to integrate our action network.” In 2013, in order to promote wider public participation in Xiang River protection, the provincial government recruited Green Guardians along the river. Some volunteers of Green Hunan also joined the Green Guardians and thus built a vertical relationship among themselves and the provincial government. This has also granted them official status. Under the influence of volunteers’ work, the provincial government strengthened the environmental governance along the Xiang River. In September 2013, Hunan provincial government made the Xiang River pollution treatment their top priority and allocated responsibilities to city- and town-level governments.

Nevertheless, in China the cooperative relationship between civil society and government is unequal and against the background of “Strong State, Weak Society,” meaning civil organizations have to sacrifice their own autonomy to cooperate with the government. Thus, it is of vital importance that civil organizations use strategies to maintain autonomy for their survival as well as development (Yao 2013). While gaining the opportunity to initiate an equal dialogue with the government, Green Hunan has also maintained two principles: first, they have expressed their attitude of standing on the opposite side to the government but never opposing the government; second, their persistent aim is to improve local environmental protection. Therefore, if the local government’s aim is consistent with theirs, the organization will commit all its effort to support the government; however, if the local government acts to the contrary, the organization will use its capacity to rectify the government’s (in) actions. In either way, what the organization does is within a politically tolerable scope: it is not opposing the government. As one civil society volunteer explained:

Our cooperation with governmental departments is based on our own aim of action; if the local governmental department is making environmental protection its aim, then we will be their assistant; however if they are working against the aim, then we will insist on our aim and use our own resources and methods to solve the problems. It is negotiation rather than cooperation.

Regarding environmental pollution reports submitted by volunteers, the government generally takes measures to solve the problem on time; if it is unable to do it immediately, it will also provide feedback accordingly. The local government also established an internal reporting channel for volunteers, such as giving environmental enforcement officials' contact numbers to volunteers and using internal Wechat groups to communicate directly with the volunteers. Generally, when volunteers find problems, they will first use the internal reporting system. Reporting to the government first has effectively made the local government the vanguard for tackling environmental problems. This makes it possible for the government to take credit and thus safeguard its public image and performance achievement.

Nevertheless, soft strategy does not always work. Under such circumstances, Green Hunan has to adopt both soft strategy and hard strategy to achieve its aim. In 2016, local residents complained to the government that ZBG Company emitted below standard waste water, but did not receive any response. Residents then informed volunteers of Green Hunan. The volunteers felt a bit surprised when they also did not hear any response from the local government. For example, one participant explained how, "Generally, once we see any environmental problem, and post it in our group, or make a phone call, the Environmental Protection Bureau will respond very soon. The waste water pollution was related to an important model project of heavy metal production, why did the Environmental Protection Bureau not take any action this time?" Feeling disappointed, volunteers went to the pollution site that very night and confirmed the pollution situation. They called the local environmental protection bureau's 24-hour-hotline but to no avail. Then they called the director of the local Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) and reported the situation of the pollution together with the non-responsive government hotline. Later, although both local EPB officials and the company came to the site, both parties only explained that they were not responsible for it and wished the matter to be left as it was.

The volunteers did not give up. The following day, they published the pollution situation online. Due to the company status as a model project, the online post attracted attention from the central government. On the following day, both the Emergency Center of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the

Provincial Environmental Protection Department sent officials to the pollution site. The local government had to take corresponding actions to solve the problem. Inevitably, noticing that the local government had taken concrete actions, and in order to safeguard their negotiation relationship with the government and show their respect to the local government, volunteers immediately posted another online article to praise the quick and effective response of the local government: “Of course, we need to give consideration of the local government since the establishment of our collaborative relationship. Thus, once they start to take action, I will write an article to praise their effective action,” explained one environmental volunteer.

Depending on the situation, volunteers have adopted a strategy of integrating negotiation and confrontation. When they found that negotiation does not work toward the aim of environmental protection, they started making the issue bigger to create public pressure as well as to attract attention from higher governmental institutions to exert official pressure upon local governments. Hence a confrontation occurred.

Discussion

When environmental issues become the focal point of public attention, more and more Chinese citizens start to initiate voluntary environmental protection activities. Volunteers differ from stakeholders in local NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) campaigns (local protests against new or existing industrial facilities are often dismissed – or politically accepted – because they are framed as only related to local, personal interests); generally, they do not have direct personal interests pertaining to the environmental problems. Compared to pollution victims’ environmental struggle for damages and compensation, volunteers of Green Hunan aim to protect the environment *per se*. This has, on the one hand, effectively helped them to gain public support and strengthened their social and political legitimacy; on the other hand, it has also offered them resources and platforms to communicate more forcefully and effectively with the local government.

At present, influenced by the political system, and against the background that resources and power relationships are in a greatly imbalanced situation where enterprises and governments have been playing a dominant role, citizens face great obstacles in using the official channels to achieve their aims. “Making bigger” has thus become the core logic for many stakeholders to push for solutions to social problems (Han 2012). At the same time, along with the changes in social structure and increasing citizen rights consciousness, many social groups

have taken all kinds of methods to impose pressure upon policy makers (Wang 2006), as is demonstrated in our case study of Green Hunan. The organization has adopted both soft strategy and hard strategy of negotiation and “pushing back” – creating public opinion and attracting upper-level government attention to impose pressure upon local government. This “pushing back” is a confrontational strategy of the environmental organization to gain social resources when the official channels, such as calling the government hotline, had no result.

One co-founder of Green Hunan explained: “Many ... think there is no way for Chinese people to protest, but I want to say that this is changing. We are protesting and the government is listening” (De 2016). Using the strategy of “pushing back” to create public pressure, Green Hunan volunteers have become able to negotiate with the local government. Negotiation has thus effectively formed the base from which Green Hunan can develop within the limited political space where Chinese government imposes various controls upon social organizations. Regarding civil organizations, particularly those with little potential to challenge the government, the government generally holds an attitude of non-interference; however, regarding organizations that express clear politically opposing opinions, the government maintains a strict policy of banning and cracking down (Kang and Han 2005). This has clearly affected how environmental organizations choose to take action. On the one hand, they have to adapt to the current political environment, thus forming an embedded activism; on the other hand, they also need to be acknowledged and supported by the public. The latter requires the organizations to maintain their autonomy.

Autonomy refers to the process in which civil organization can make its own decision on actions and programs to carry out (Fan 2010; Yao 2013). Autonomy is the basis for local environmental organizations to gain social trust and public support. It also provides the condition for the organization to attract attention from various levels of government and safeguards its capacity to negotiate with the local government. By adopting the strategies of “pushing back” and negotiation, and emphasizing its non-oppositional attitude, Green Hunan has achieved official legitimacy while at the same time also maintaining its autonomy and activism.

As discussed by Ren (2013), several factors have contributed to public participation in China’s political system: the difference between the central and local government regarding environmental governance, the division of state and cities in various interests, the power relationship among various departments of the government, the state *Xinfang* (letter and visit) system for citizens to submit complaints, and the commercialization of social media. The achievement of Green Human also benefits from China’s administrative system. In China, the administrative system requires the lower-level administrations to be

responsible to the higher-level administrations (Xie and Dang 2015). Being carriers of the central policies, local governments bear the responsibility of taking measures to achieve concrete results for central government discourses, laws, and policies (Ran 2015, 63).

China's environmental governance is essentially a closed, internal, self-monitoring system, and there is no effective monitoring system to check whether local governments have fully carried out the policies (Ran 2015, 129). Very often, local governments put economic development as their first priority, and thus neglect environmental policies, leading to environmental degradation. The monitoring and dissemination of environmental problems via social media by volunteers of Green Hunan has helped to create a new channel for the higher-level government to obtain information and carry out supervision in relation to the local environmental situation. This, in a way, helps the central government respond to local problems through ad hoc solutions and make it an integral part of the regime's dynamic stability (Froissant 2007, 119). As long as the actions taken by the environmental organization do not interfere or oppose the political power, a volunteer organization can take advantage of their being in an alliance with the central government to strengthen its own capacity and to gain bargaining power against the local government (Lin 2007).

Technically, using the media as a platform has provided local organizations the opportunity to interact directly and effectively with both the government and the general public. Before establishing their cooperative negotiation relationship with the local government, Green Hunan had to use "pushing back" to lay the basis for the government to respond. Through the Internet, civil organizations have initiated information dissemination, which leads to public reaction and wider public participation. This has further made the issues more influential and created pressure upon the government to take action. More importantly, the strategy of "pushing back" has not only made the local issues public, but also pushed the environmental organization to center stage. This has greatly strengthened its social recognition and political legitimacy, making it deeply and effectively rooted in the public space. While the local organization has gained more and more social influence, its political influence has also increased. Inevitably, the local government does not wish the organization to be more influential than the government itself; it also does not want the organization to escalate environmental issues to higher-level governments. Therefore, to maintain its controlling power, limit the influence of social organization, and avoid being inconsistent with central government policy, local government has to respond by initiating communications with the environmental organization. Negotiation with the government has thus been established.

In contrast to the local government, environmental organizations do not have the power to solve environmental problems, even though they are capable of monitoring them; therefore, they must rely on the government to resolve environmental issues. Under this situation, the local organization must maintain a sophisticated balance in its interactions with the government. On the one hand, volunteers have to adopt hard methods such as “pushing back” to impose pressure upon the local government through making issues bigger and louder; on the other hand, they need to restrain their actions to as not to anger all levels of government. It is rather a soft confrontation: actions taken by Green Hunan are neither completely compromising nor confrontational, but an integrated approach of being both confrontational and cooperative. It can be represented by the Chinese word *Ren* (韧) that refers to an indomitable and persistent spirit that is soft but resilient, and unlikely to break.

Conclusion

Chinese civil organizations are not the opposite of the party of the state, nor do they represent completely independent social groups. In order to continuously push for solutions to environmental problems, they have to maintain an embedded activism within the political institutions while letting the government play the dominant role. This nevertheless does not mean that civil organizations are only collaborating with the government, though, inevitably, they are not confronting the government either.

By sticking to the principle of “to stand opposite the government, but not against it,” Green Hunan has played an effective role in environmental governance in China, a country with limited space for public participation. By negotiation and pushback, the organization has maintained both a collaborative organization and a bargaining power against the local government. When it spots an environmental problem, the organization first raises it in a rational way via official channels. This is cooperation. When facing inaction or negligence by the government or enterprise, members make efforts to mobilize both online and offline media to attract both public and higher-level government attention, and initiate a pushback effect upon the local government in the pursuit of the public interest. This is where the confrontation happens. However, when the government takes measures to solve the problem under public pressure, they choose not to take credit but praise the government for resolving the issue. This effectively reduces their initial confrontation, and shifts into soft confrontation. When encountering government or enterprises cosying up, they choose to collaborate and let them be the frontline soldiers. These specific actions have

clearly strengthened Green Hunan's capacity and legitimacy, and maintained its autonomy in the fight for environmental protection.

By making environmental claims based on evidential factors, as opposed to environmental post-truths, Green Hunan has helped to provide knowledge to counterbalance the nature of expertise in China, where mainstream official discourse is generally considered the only truth, and voices of citizens are largely neglected or even repressed (Chen 2017).

Born locally, with a focus on local issues, engaging both the society and the government, and using an integrated strategy of pushback and negotiation in a form of soft confrontation, Green Hunan has created its own opportunities in its interactions with the government against the limited space for civil society in China. "Soft confrontation" perhaps sounds oxymoronic, yet under the current political system in China, it has provided the opportunity for the local organization to play an effective role in pushing forward its aim of environmental protection. Inevitably, Green Hunan is not the only one that has adopted this strategy. Many other organizations have been "confronting" the government as well, though focusing on different issues and varying in specific methods and actions. However, to what extent this strategy will continue to work depends largely on the government. If the Chinese government needs to further depend upon environmental organizations in tackling its existing rampant environmental problems, and thus offers more levers to the organizations, it is possible that organizations could be able to adopt more confrontational actions to further strengthen their capacity to interact with the government. Yet with the Chinese government gradually increasing its control over civic organizations, the question of whether future soft confrontations will continue to be acceptable is impossible to answer.

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