

# **Environmental Communication with Chinese Characteristics: Crises, Conflicts, and Prospects**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

In the past three decades, the deterioration of our natural environment has stimulated heated debates and disputes, in which China has been regarded as a key player in contemporary environmental crises. This thesis examines how China's environmental challenges and its government's responses are discursively constructed in news media. At the theoretical level, China's contemporary environmental crises are scrutinized through the lenses of environmental communication and political economy, which addresses the uniqueness of these environmental challenges compared with those in the Western context. At the methodical level, the thesis adopts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective to analyze the presentation of social actors and the argumentation strategies in two high-profile environmental incidences in China: the air pollution in Beijing and the 2012 anti-PX protest in Ningbo. The empirical analysis shows that both cases indicate a lack of environmental justice perspective in China's current environmental policies and media practices. They also reveal the necessity of reviewing the urban-centric and elitist perspectives embedded in China's contemporary media practices. Overall, this study adds to our understanding of the discursive and ideological underpinnings of China's environmental challenges and the significance of developing "environmental communication with Chinese characteristics".

**Keywords:** environmental crisis; environmental justice; China; critical discourse analysis; media discourse

## **Dedication**

To my parents, who support my adventure in the unpredictable world

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Our world faces huge environmental challenges. The world's population has doubled and the size of world economy has expanded from less than \$5 trillion to more than \$35 trillion over the past half-century (World Bank, 2014a). Such dramatic economic expansion and population growth have created increasing pressure on the natural environment: tens of thousands of plant and animal species have gone extinct in the past fifty years; overfishing has caused the collapse of approximately 30% fisheries worldwide; over 80% of agricultural land in dry regions suffers from modest to severe degradation; and only 20% of the world's forests are not threatened by deforestation (World Bank, 2014b). Not only do environmental crises create significant damage to global ecosystems, but they also generate severe negative impacts to human society. The vast amounts of waste, heavy metals, and hazardous materials generated during economic production and consumption processes have been buried or dumped into rivers and oceans, causing irreversible impacts to our living environment. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people die from industrial pollution around the world. Perhaps the biggest environmental challenge of our time is climate change. Despite some scepticism of a small number of people, it is clear that the global temperature has been increasing and this will generate unpredictable results for our planet. As the fifth assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) warns, we risk passing the "tipping point" of climate change and we need to adapt to some irreversible damage caused by climate change. In short, the pressures placed on the natural world by our current developmental path are not sustainable and the continuing deterioration of our planet's ecosystems poses a major threat to the very future of human civilization.

The fact that current environmental crises have accelerated over the past three decades should be viewed against the backdrop of increased neoliberalization and globalization (Díez, 2008; Dryzek, 2013). The process of globalization has been unfolding for quite some time and its current phase is characterized by deeper and faster global interconnections that go beyond the economic realm. To some extent, the

globalization process in the last 30 years has accelerated the degradation of our natural environment since it promotes an unsustainable economic model that champions unleashed economic growth and consumerism (Foster, Clark, & York, 2010). This situation has been further intensified by the worldwide prevalence of neoliberal ideas and practices, which seek to extend market logic into politics and society (Robinson, 2006). As such, today's environmental crises are deeply embedded in a series of economic, political, and societal issues and the "politics of the earth" is home to heated debates and disputes (Dryzek, 2013).

One major player in these discussions and debates is China. China's swift economic growth since the 1980s has generated huge ecological burdens on its natural environment and these environmental challenges do not stop at state borders (Shapiro, 2012). It is no exaggeration to say that China's environmental challenges have profound impacts around the world. For instance, China's expanding energy consumption has generated environmental problems in Canada, where the environmentally devastating tar sand industry is being developed in Alberta, targeting China as one of its future market. China's construction of dams on the Salween and Mekong Rivers has significantly impacted local environments and economies in Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, China's environmental issues are interconnected with the rest of the world and whether the country is going to take a more sustainable developmental path will influence not only the well-being of itself but the very future of our planet (Economy, 2010; Ma, 2008).

Studies on China's environmental challenges and environmental politics have preoccupied many scholars over the past decade (i.e. Economy 2010; Shapiro 2012; Xie 2009; Zhang & Barr, 2013). Most of these studies have focused on the economic and political implications of China's environmental challenges; much less attention, however, has been paid to how these challenges and the Chinese government's responses are discursively constructed in news media. Such neglect suggests a valuable "niche" for further research. In essence, environmental issues are public affairs and the rise of a global network society makes news media a key intermediary in the conduct of public affairs (Castells, 2004). As Lester (2010) argues, "news is a key site for information, analysis and debate on public issues" (p.3).

The purpose of this thesis is three-fold: first, to bring attention to the uniqueness of environmental challenges in China; second, to explore current media discourse on China's environmental issues; third, to offer some tentative reflections on the future of environmental communication in China. For these purposes, the thesis draws from previous research on environmental communication, environmental politics, and political economy to investigate the discursive-ideological constructions of China's environmental issues in news media. The empirical analysis reported here is based on two case studies: the air pollution issue in Beijing and the 2012 environmental protest in Ningbo. Following the analytical framework of critical dis-course analysis, I argue that both cases demonstrate the absence of environmental justice perspective in China's current environmental policies and media practices. As such, the efforts in building a sustainable China require the establishment of an "environmental unified front", in which all social classes in China should join together and initiate the progress of "ecological civilization". As shown in the rest of the thesis, the path toward a more sustainable China is still open; however, this will require abandoning the urban-centric and elitist perspectives that are deeply embedded in contemporary media discourse in China.

This thesis is structured as follows. Building upon previous research on environmental communication, Chapter Two reviews the development of environmental communication and the major issues surrounding contemporary environmental crises. This is followed by an over-view of the dynamic relationship between news media and environmental issues in Chapter Three. Then, Chapter Four elaborates on the challenges of greening China and emerging environmental protection actions happening in the country. Chapter Five shifts the discussion to China's media system and scrutinizes how its internal dynamics influence journalistic practices in China. Next, Chapter Six presents the two case studies on media's coverage of China's environmental challenges. Finally, Chapter Seven concludes the thesis and offers some tentative reflections on the development of "environmental communication with Chinese characteristics".

## **Chapter 2. Environmental Communication and Global Environmental Crises**

The study of environmental discourse, whether short-term or long-term, local or global, will inevitably engage questions of environmental communication and contemporary global environmental crises. Although contemporary global environmental crises have generated extensive academic and public debates, discussions regarding these issues have come relatively late in the discipline of communication. As a result, many questions about the role of communication with respect to environmental issues remain unanswered.

China's unprecedented economic growth brings a heavy environmental cost, which makes it an important -- even decisive -- player in global environmental politics. As Shapiro (2012) points out: "salient current drivers of environmental change in China are similar to and yet different from the main drivers of change throughout the world" (p. 34). Thus, it is necessary to overview some key issues of environmental communication and global environmental crises before the elaboration of China's environmental issues and their related discourses.

This chapter reviews the development of environmental communication and the major issues surrounding contemporary environmental crises, thereby establishing the theoretical framework of this thesis. On the one hand, the chapter looks into the social and political conditions of environmental communication's swift growth since the 1980s. On the other hand, it briefly surveys four major issues of contemporary global environmental crises: economic growth, consumerism, public engagement, and environmental justice. This chapter starts by introducing the discipline of environmental communication with particular emphasis to its orientation to crisis. Then, it analyzes economic growth, consumption, and their connections with the global environmental crises. The next part focuses on the potential for public engagement with environmental issues, and how such engagement is often hindered as a consequence of the

information deficit model adopted by political institutions. The final part discusses the concept of environmental justice and argues that it can be used as an effective frame for mobilizing collective actions against the global environmental crises.

## **2.1. Defining Environmental Communication**

Over the past three decades, environmental communication has rapidly grown as a new sub-discipline of communication studies. Oravec's (1981) seminal research on John Muir's appeals to preserve Yosemite Valley in California in the 19th century is considered by many to mark the origin of scholarship in environmental communication (Cox, 2013). The formal establishment of the field came in 1996 with the application to create an "Environmental Communication Commission" within the Speech Communication Association<sup>1</sup> (Senecah, 2007). The International Environmental Communication Association (IECA) was established in 2011, marking the inauguration of environmental communication at the international level.

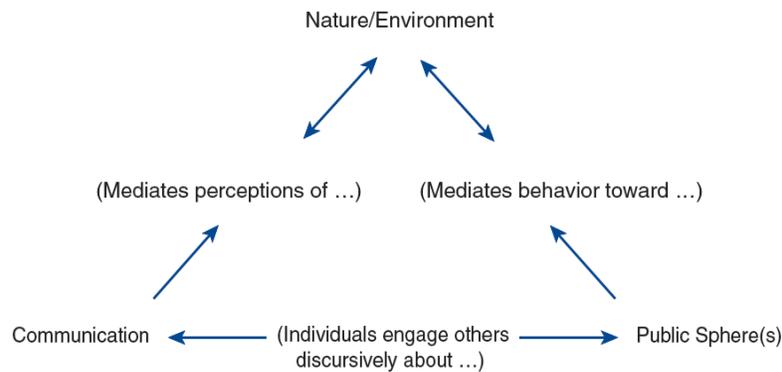
Environmental communication is an interdisciplinary field working within the discipline of communication. It draws theoretical inspiration from a variety of fields, including anthropology, (critical) ecology, sociology, and political economy (Senecah, 2007). For instance, early studies on eco-rhetoric in the U.S. have highlighted symbolic conflicts over issues such as wilderness, forests, and farmlands, in which the environment itself was analyzed as a novel subject of research for communication scholars (e.g. Cox, 1982; Lange, 1993; Moore, 1993; Oravec, 1981). The development of environmental communication has been strongly influenced by the rise of local (and global) environmental movements as well. The establishment of environmental communication in the U.S., for example, was clearly inspired by the growth of the U.S. environmental movement since the 1960s. Inspired by Rachel Carson's (1962) seminal work on the environmental damage of DDT, U.S. environmentalists took a series of actions during the 1960s, which eventually led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. In addition, U.S. environmentalists have repeatedly emphasized the need for public participation in environmental decisions and highlighted

<sup>1</sup> Now the National Communication Association (NCA)

how such participation can be facilitated by various communication methods. As a result, the relation between communication, policy formation and political engagement become an important area of inquiry in environmental communication.

According to Cox (2013), environmental communication refers to “the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world; it is the symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and negotiating society’s different responses to them” (p. 19). Social and symbolic representations of the environment reflect public orientations towards nature at the societal level. Current global environmental crises (e.g. climate change, biodiversity extinction, overpopulation, etc.) are symptomatic of the systemic failure of our economic and political systems that are based upon the exploitation of nature. Motivated by the need to describe and understand such systemic failure, environmental communication can be defined as a “crisis-oriented” discipline that both emerges out of environmental crises and tries to resolve them (Cox, 2007). According to Cox (2007), environmental communication has an “ethical duty” to enhance the ability of human society to respond appropriately to environmental signals. As such, it ought to be guided by two primary objectives: (1) interpreting the symbolic representations of nature, and (2) recommending alternative solutions to prevent ecological degradation.

Cox (2013) identifies three key themes within environmental communication: nature, communication, and the public sphere(s). As shown in Figure 1, the three themes overlap each other and, consequently, none of them can be adequately addressed on its own. “Communication” emphasizes the symbolic nature of human communication behaviour; “nature/environment” highlights the fact that our perceptions of environment are always symbolically mediated and constructed; and “public sphere(s)” (Habermas, 1989) serves as the discursive space for interactions between communication and environment to occur.



**Figure 1: Nature, communication, and the public sphere**

In short, environmental communication investigates symbolic actions regarding environmental topics (e.g. media coverage, scientific reports, and public consultations). The field is a crisis-oriented discipline that studies the interaction between three key elements: nature, communication, and public sphere(s). The field has pragmatic as well as constitutive functions: it is pragmatic as it assists us to solve environmental issues; it is constitutive as it also constructs representations of nature and environmental problems.

## **2.2. The Economic Realm of Environmental Crises: Economic Growth and Consumerism**

Economic growth is the secular religion of advancing industrial societies and the constitutive mechanism of modern capitalism (Speth, 2008). In contemporary society, it is not enough for economies to simply grow; they are also judged by their growth rate (Foster et al., 2010; Soron, 2010). For many – including key economic and political institutions, as well as our commercial media – it is simply unacceptable for an economy to grow at a slow pace. McNeil (2000) defines this fixation upon economic growth as a “growth fetish” and describes it as “the overarching priority and the most important idea of the twentieth century” (p. 336).

But never-ending economic growth within a global capitalist system is deeply intertwined with deteriorating environmental crises worldwide. The global expansion of neoliberal capitalism has dramatically increased the rate of natural resource

consumption and industrial waste production over the past six decades. Consider the case of China: swift economic growth since the 1990s has made it the world's largest contributor for greenhouse gas emissions with over 20% of total global emissions, and this situation is expected to worsen in the next decade (Li, M., 2009). As Foster et al. (2010) note, the climate crisis is so urgent that the global environment may soon reach a "tipping point": unless substantial changes are made to our current economic system, "irrecoverable and catastrophic" climate change will occur within the next decade.

A leading driver of environmental degradation is the dominance of consumerism in contemporary society. Consumerism can be defined as an economic and social order that encourages the consumption of goods and services in an ever-increasing manner (Foster et al., 2010; Speth, 2008). It serves as a pillar for modern capitalism since the increase of consumer spending is the principle driver of economic growth. The dominance of consumerism in contemporary culture has created a consumer society, in which people are encouraged to purchase far beyond their basic needs. Consumer debt in the U. S., for instance, climbed from \$525 billion to \$2,225 billion from 1970 to 2004 (Speth, 2008).

From a theoretical perspective, consumerism is a complex social phenomenon. According to Jackson (2005), the critical study of consumerism can be roughly divided into four approaches: conceptualizing it as a social pathology, an evolutionary behavior, a means of achieving symbolic values embedded in consumer goods, and a social behavior manipulated by social conventions or business. Irrespective of its primary drivers or constitutive mechanisms, perpetually increasing levels of consumer spending is environmentally unsustainable. Embedded within consumerism is an expansive dynamic that promotes the non-stop expansion of consumption. This dynamic is determined by the logic of capital accumulation. As summarized in Marx's (1867) well-known "M-C-M (prime)" formula, the core logic of capitalism is the transformation of capital into commodities that are sold at a profit and thereby transformed into more capital. In particular, capitalism must perpetually generate and increase popular demand for commodities. Consumerism serves as a "hard-working salesman" for capital accumulation, not only harnessing desires to the commodity form, but also increasingly accelerating the cycle of consumption itself. Given the finite resources available on this

planet, this fantasy of “ever-increasing consumption” is, undoubtedly, environmentally unsustainable (Meadows et al., 1972).

As awareness of environmental crises has grown, some have sought to (re)position capitalism itself as providing a suite of ‘market-based’ solutions to ecological problems. In general, these solutions can be divided into two types: (1) “supply-oriented” solutions (e.g. carbon cap or trade systems) that focus upon the internalization of environmental costs within capitalist production and (2) “demand-oriented” solutions (e.g. green consumerism) that target the (voluntary) revision of people’s consumption preferences and behavior. The supply-oriented solutions proceed from the assumption that the key problem of capitalism today is the inadequate (and often completely absent) valuation of nature (Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 2010). Nature, as both a source of cheap resources and a garbage dump for capitalist production, tends to be treated as an “externality” and, therefore, the prices that are attached to the exploitation and pollution of nature are much too low. If ‘eco-system services’ were appropriately valued, then capitalism could be made more sustainable. The key to solving environmental crises, in other words, is “getting prices right” for nature.

However, as Marxist critics point out (e.g. Foster et al. 2010), the efficacy of such solutions is inevitably constrained by the basic logic of capitalism. Capitalism is, inherently, an exponential growth economy driven by the fundamental goal of accumulation. The rate of economic growth serves as the unparalleled indicator of prosperity within capitalist systems: all companies must prioritize and maximize profit, and this necessarily propels the system into a state of perpetual growth. Capitalists (especially big corporations) inevitably strive to minimize their costs in order to maximize profit, and one of the most effective ways to minimize costs is through externalization. The environmental costs associated with this logic have, historically, always exceeded the benefits associated with the introduction of more sustainable technologies. Failing to tackle the core logic of capital accumulation, the supply-oriented solutions will, necessarily, always be incomplete with respect to addressing ecological problems. Foster et al. (2010) also argue that environmental degradation is further intensified by “contempocentric tendencies” (i.e. the bias of preferring the present over the future) within capitalism. Driven by the logic of accumulation, capitalists perpetually strive to increase the fluidity and speed of markets and this, in turn, forces all corporations to

pursue short-term (rather than long-term) profits and as a result, nature becomes the “victim of improvidence”. Finally, the benefits brought by the reduction of environmental waste per commodity during production processes are often offset by the increase of overall consumption, which is commonly known as the “Jevons paradox”.

Compared with the supply-oriented solutions, the demand-oriented solutions, especially green consumerism, represent a type of individualized approaches to environmental problems. The basic assumption of green consumerism is that the individual choices of consumers, aggregated through markets, will generate collective pressure upon capitalist production processes (Speth, 2008). Consumers are encouraged to buy more green products that will support their producers and this will eventually shift consumption away from environmentally harmful products and services and direct it toward eco-friendly ones.

Green consumerism, though, is problematic in several ways. First, it emphasizes eco-friendly behavior within private consumption, which legitimizes existing dynamics of consumption and production that shifts responsibility from governments and corporations to individual consumers (Maniates, 2001). Second, green consumerism is often used as a marketing strategy to encourage private purchase of “green products”, which is based, primarily, upon the pursuit of profit rather than ecological sustainability. In many cases, the environmental benefits of a particular good or service are exaggerated or misrepresented, which is known as “greenwashing” (Cox, 2013). Third, green consumerism fails to acknowledge class struggles embedded in private consumption. As noted by Foster et al. (2010), green consumerism often functions as a form of “economic Malthusianism” that directs a critique of private consumption largely at ordinary consumers. That is, individuals are encouraged to assume responsibility (and, therefore, guilt) for environmental crisis: it is our choices (instead of the logic of promotion) that are to blame. This frame essentially accepts the assumption that individuals are fully rational and autonomous in making consumer choices and thus denies how corporations themselves actively intervene to shape consumption behavior, and many decisions about consumption are in fact dictated by “invisible” structures and patterns within everyday life (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012).

Alternatives have emerged in recent years, which openly confront both economic growth and ever-increasing private consumption. In terms of economic growth, two distinctive approaches, eco-modernization and eco-socialism, are noteworthy (Barnes, 2006; Foster et al., 2010; Jackson, 2009; Soron, 2010; Speth, 2008). Eco-modernization (especially its strong version) presents a reformist perspective of market-based “supply-oriented” solutions. These reforms mainly involve the re-definition of “growth” and the adoption of new measurements for human prosperity (Barnes, 2006; Speth, 2008). In other words, eco-modernization challenges the view that economic growth is the best means of achieving human prosperity; instead, new metrics need to be brought into consideration to expand and redefine our conception of social development. For instance, Speth (2008) argues that markets need much stronger and more extensive regulations in order to challenge the unparalleled role of economic growth in the current economic system. Ecological limits should be implemented not only through tax or cap-and-trade mechanisms but also through the structural reform of corporations to prevent them from externalizing their environmental costs. Similarly, Jackson (2009) proposes a redefinition of “prosperity” in light of the evidence about what really contributes to people’s wellbeing: the simple equation of quantity (material growth) with quality is false in general and “prosperity without growth” (i.e. a growth in social prosperity *instead of* material wealth) is a financial and ecological necessity. It is worthwhile to point out that there are distinctions between “strong” and “weak” approaches to ecological modernization, as defined by the extent to which capitalism and markets are subjected to social and democratic regulations. Scholars such as James Speth and Tim Jackson represent voices of the “strong” approach whereas pro-market scholars such as Thomas Friedman and Douglas Torgerson are exemplary of the “weak” approach. Followers of the strong ecological modernization propose a complete re-configuration of current economic, social, and political systems whereas followers of the weak version propose much more modest revisions of the current capitalist system. Nonetheless, eco-modernization in general proposes that our society must enter a new era with significantly enhanced considerations of environmental impacts and increased regulation of the market.

While eco-modernization suggests that significant, structural reforms to market regulations are required, there is a general consensus among many proponents that it is

simply impossible to directly challenge capitalism at this point given how entrenched and powerful it has become and the tight timeframe imposed by ecological crises. As such, the solutions proposed by eco-modernization emphasize the imposition of some limits on markets through enhancing democratic and public capacity, but they fall short of advocating a complete break with the current capitalist system. This has attracted significant criticism from eco-socialism. For instance, Foster et al. (2010), question the feasibility of eco-modernist solutions, emphasizing “in a capitalist society any critique of capital accumulation is difficult to maintain within a reformist frame work, since this constitutes the main condition of existence of the system” (p. 163). Instead, eco-socialists favor a revolutionary break with capitalism and propose an economic system based upon substantive equality and ecological planning. Accordingly, eco-socialism demands a fundamental transformation of contemporary society. As Soron (2010) points out, such transformation needs to overcome three essential obstructions. First, responses to environmental issues from experts should be more connected with the public to create broad pressure for social transformation from below. Second, the development of practical strategies should be more connected with the public, which is often neglected by environmental analysts. Third, ecological struggles at the local level should be better coordinated, which would locate agency for radical social transformation in the future. At one level, the radical critique of capitalism presented by eco-socialism is the only approach which fully grapples with both the totality and the immediacy of environmental crises; yet, one suspects that some form of accommodation with existing economic and political systems is necessary if the principles of eco-socialism are ever to be realized.

Overall, the major causes of current global environmental crises are the blind pursuit of economic growth and the ever-increasing consumption. The various solutions offered by current environmental movements, despite their distinctive approaches, *all* require the expansion of our political and democratic capacity to better engage with environmental issues. Such requirement highlights the absolute necessity of moving ecological reforms beyond the economic realm.

## 2.3. The Political Realm of Environmental Crises (1): Public Engagement

As the history of social movements suggests, extensive public support often plays a key role in the realization of (radical) political changes. According to Foster et al. (2010), the public's active engagement with environmental issues is crucial for achieving a sustainable future of our society. Despite the wide recognition of environmental issues, however, the public (especially in the United States) tends to demonstrate a lack of interest and political engagement regarding environmental policies. One recent public survey done by Gallup shows that only 24% Americans regards climate change as an important public issue and this result only ranks only 14<sup>th</sup> among the 15 public issues investigated in the survey (Riffkin, 2014). This situation presents a serious problem as insufficient public response may make environmentalism only stay at the symbolic level<sup>2</sup>.

“Engagement” can be defined as a personal state of connection with specific public issues at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels (Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole & Whitmarsh, 2007). Following this definition, public engagement should go beyond the cognitive level (or the state of knowing) to produce actual and effective political actions from the public. Thus, for environmental crises, it is not enough for people to just understand this issue; they also need to care about it and be willing to take action. Current practices of public engagement often over-emphasize the cognitive aspect of engagement and neglect its other aspects. Political institutions tend to follow the “information deficit” model to develop strategies for public engagement. The information deficit model is based upon the assumption that there is a lack of scientific information among the public due to the division between experts and non-experts, which causes public skepticism or hostility toward particular issues (Moser & Dilling, 2007). In other words, the assumption is that people are not changing their behavior because of a lack of knowledge. According to the information deficit model, informing the public will “automatically” generate public engagement in policy-making processes. As a result, various strategies aiming at improving communications between experts and non-experts have been implemented by practitioners of environmental policies, such as

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the focus on improving public engagement presents a liberal view of environmentalism, that is, governments only need to pay attention to what people want.

increasing the media coverage of particular issues, publishing policy documents, and hosting public consultations. One example is the “technical” approach of risk communication, which relies upon scientific expertise for risk assessment and then communicates the assessment results to the public (Bocking, 2004).

Nevertheless, the information deficit model has been widely criticized in the environmental communication literature for its limits in dealing with the global environmental crises. In many cases, providing more information to the public does not generate increased affective engagement or behavioral changes. Several studies and public surveys have found that the public tends to demonstrate a certain degree of “blindness” regarding the global environmental crises in spite of their general recognition of the deteriorating environment worldwide (Corner & Randaall, 2011; Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg & Howe, 2013; Ryghaug & Naess, 2012). In other words, people seem to “live with” the emotional burden caused by climate change, showing unwillingness to actively discuss this issue in their daily lives.

One representative case for such “socially organized denial” (Norgaard, 2011) is the public’s disengagement with climate change in Norway documented in Norgaard’s recent ethnographic research (2011). Recognized as one of the world’s most livable countries, Norway enjoys a global recognition for its high living quality and clean environment. The Norwegian government also has a reputation for its support of environmental protection. However, as Norgaard’s ethnographic research (2011) shows, the Norwegian public has developed a “collective avoidance” of climate issues due to the emotional distress (e.g. fear, helplessness, and helplessness) brought by climate change related thinking and engagement. As a result, climate change is kept out of daily conversations through various social and discursive strategies. Such a dilemma is accurately caught by the title of Norgaard’s book: *Living in Denial*. The public silence on climate change is not a simple matter of ignorance or lack of knowledge; rather it is a social and psychological phenomenon constructed by complicated factors.

In line with Norgaard’s argument, Ryghaug and Naess (2012) discuss the “domestication” of climate change by the Norwegian public and how this process creates a lack of perceived relevance that leads to the public’s disengagement with climate change politics. The interviews in Ryghaug and Naess’ research indicate that the

Norwegian public has fairly good knowledge about climate change: in other words, this issue does not suffer from information deficit. Nonetheless, the interviews also show that climate change issues are critically evaluated by people's assessment of the connections between environmental politics and their daily life situations. In particular, the comfort culture and high environment quality in Norway makes the discussion of climate change absent in many Norwegians' daily lives.

According to Lorenzoni et al. (2007), there are individual and social barriers in our daily lives preventing meaningful engagement with global environmental crises. The individual barriers (e.g. environmental skepticism or a lack of environmental knowledge) mainly function at the cognitive and affective levels. These barriers reflect the divergent ways of understanding climate change among the public and the fact that these understandings draw on broader discourses than simply scientific knowledge. By comparison, the social barriers (e.g. the inaction of governments and corporations) tend to prevent engagement at the behavioral level. The interdependency between physical infrastructures and social institutions creates a lock-in that maintains environmentally detrimental behavior and restricts radical changes. The change of consumption patterns, for instance, cannot occur without substantial support for governments and corporations. Lorenzoni et al. (2007) argue that public understanding of global environmental crises draws on both scientific information and individual factors such as personal values, moral responsibilities, and local knowledge. For many people living in Western countries, global environmental crises (e.g. climate change), despite their seriousness, are perceived as something "remote" that could not be handled at the personal level (Bulkeley, 2000). Along with the feeling of "remoteness", barriers emerge at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels, which morally sanction individual actions against the environmental crises. In short, many barriers preventing public engagement with climate change issues, as summarized in Lorenzoni et al. (2007) and other studies, are not caused by a lack of knowledge on environmental crises. The major limitation of the information deficit model in public engagement is that it only deals with barriers at the cognitive level, leaving affective and behavioral barriers more or less untouched.

In addition to the information deficit approach, another popular approach to public engagement is the individualized approach that defines "environmentalism" as a kind of personal choice or life style. The individualized approach is a key feature of green

consumerism. However, as discussed in the previous section, completely transferring the responsibility of environmental protection to individuals legitimizes the status quo of the current regime of consumerism and it would fail to slow the overall consumption rate of natural resources. Maniates (2001) discusses the idea of “individualism” in personal environmental protection efforts (e.g. plant a tree, buy a bike, etc.) and concludes that these efforts alone would not save the planet as they let the undesirable forms of consumption (i.e. over consumption, commodification, & consumerism) sneak into environmental debates, which further obscure the asymmetry of power and responsibility within environmental problems. Similarly, Shove (2010) critically evaluates the dominant paradigm of the “ABC” model (attitude, behavior, and choice) in social change conceptualizations and suggests that such a paradigm “derives from a strand of psychological literature grounded in theories of planned behavior and in variously rational concepts of need, resonates with widely shared common sense ideas about media influence and individual agency” (p. 1274). As such, the “ABC” model leaves a blindspot in environmental policies: it obscures the extent to which governments maintain unsustainable economic institutions and ways of life, which further prevents the discussions of alternative ways of thinking and the adoption of more extensive range of intellectual resources in policy-making processes.

Overall, public engagement practices should go beyond the information deficit approach as well as the individualized approach. Focusing on individual attitude and behavior changes are important but not sufficient. Instead, alternative strategies beyond the information level are required. In this regard, public engagement requires shifts to (a) collective and political actions and (b) comprehensive engagement at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. To encourage collective and political actions, community perspectives need to be added into current public engagement practices. As Todhunter (2011) argues, communities should be the information mediators for environmental policies and the initiators for lifestyle change and policy innovation. This grassroots perspective ensures that the policies set by the central agencies can be further negotiated locally with activists and corporations. Similarly, Corner and Randall (2011), based on their analysis of environmental campaigns in the UK, argue that deep framing, value-based campaigns and the engagement of social networks and social capital

should be added into the current social marketing activities for better advocacy campaigns around sustainable behavior.

Meanwhile, the comprehensive engagement at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels require us to think beyond the current paradigm of environmental policies and actively seek for alternative ways and frames to engage the public. As I shall argue in the next section and the rest of the thesis, one of the alternatives is the environmental justice perspective that has emerged in the past three decades at the global level, especially in the Global South.

## **2.4. The Political Realm of Environmental Crises (2): Environmental Justice**

There are inseparable links between environmental sustainability and social justice. Without social justice, the damage created by resource extraction and industrial pollution can be easily displaced across time and space, concealing the real cost of consumption growth and postponing our confrontation with the limits of the earth (Shapiro, 2012). In recent years, social activists and governments have increasingly recognized the importance of environmental justice. Climate justice has emerged as a new collective action frame for public engagement at the global level, confronting the disproportionally distribution of climate change's impacts (Cox, 2013; Taylor, 2000).

One major contributor to the conceptualization of environmental justice is the environmental justice movement in the United States. In the late 1960s and 1970s, several civil rights groups, churches, and environmental leaders began to call attention to the disturbing fact that in the U.S. African American communities are much more likely to become victims of environmental hazards than Caucasian communities (Bullard, 1993, 1994). To be specific, environmental burdens created by industrial pollution are often disproportionately imposed on poor and minority communities without their participation in decision-making processes and these burdens further affect the affected communities' prosperity (Cox, 2013). Environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard (1993) coined the term "sacrifice zone" to describe the tragic experience shared by many African American communities: "they already have more than their share of

environmental problems and polluting industries, and they are still attracting new polluters” (p. 12). For Bullard and many other activists, the critical problems are the racial logic behind many environmental issues in the U.S., a logic that was largely neglected by mainstream discourses of environmentalism during the 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, the emphasis of equality is extremely important for the pursuit of environmental justice and increasingly, it becomes the focal point of improving environmental sustainability globally.

The current proliferation of the environmental justice concept worldwide is driven by two major factors. The first is that the process of globalization has deepened the North-South divide (Díez, 2008). Along with the industrial transformation of developed countries, more and more countries from the Global South have become the destination of heavy polluting industries owned by transnational conglomerates. This process of international industry transfer hastens environmental destruction in many developing countries, which subsequently intensifies North-South conflicts. For instance, China, as the world’s largest manufacturer of electronic products, is suffering the heavy pollution of electronic waste as large quantities of this highly toxic waste are “dumped” in China by Western countries every year. Another iconic event showing the uneven process of globalization is the Bhopal gas tragedy in India, which is a direct result of the externalization of risks by transnational conglomerates. Similar opinions have also been expressed in the discussions of climate change.

The second factor is that developing countries in the Global South are suffering more negative effects of climate change due to the impeding pressure of population and economic growth and the lack of funding and technology. According to Foster et al. (2010), the uneven distribution of environmental risks worldwide presents an extension of global class struggles in the environmental spectrum. For example, climate change has aggravated the problem of desertification in West Africa, which subsequently intensifies economic, political, and social conflicts in that area (Onu, 2008). As former *New York Times* reporter Andrew Revkin (2007) observed: “in almost every instance, the people most at risk from climate change live in countries that have contributed the least to the build-up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases linked to the recent warming of the planet” (para. 2, as quoted in Cox, 2003, p. 263). In short, the Global

South is increasingly experiencing the disproportionate impacts of climate change and other environmental issues.

The environmental justice frame connects issues such as environment, labor, and social justice together. It emphasizes the concept of equality and calls for radical and alternative politics to bring genuine justice regarding environmental benefits. According to Schlosberg (2007), environmental justice involves four major components: distribution, recognition, participation, and capability. Liberal theorists in political science (e.g. Rawls, 1971; Barry, 1999) have mainly defined justice from the perspective of distribution, focusing on equity in the allocation of social goods. As Barry (1999) insists, “the concept of justice only applies when some distributive considerations came into play” (as cited in Schlosberg, 2007, p. 12). In this regard, environmental justice is mainly concerned with the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. The sole focus on distribution in approaching justice, however, has been challenged since the 1990s. Authors such as Iris Young (1990), Nancy Fraser (1997), and Axel Honneth (1995), have argued that the distributive approach to justice theory only discusses the results of injustice; it fails to address the processes constructing injustice. While fair distribution must be emphasized in the pursuit of justice, it is also crucial to ask what determines poor distributions. Following such argument, the concept of justice has been expanded in three perspectives: recognition, participation, and capability. In their critiques of Rawls (1971), Young (1990), Fraser (1997), and Honneth (1995) have insisted that more attention need to be given to the social contexts in which unjust distributions occur. The argument here is that domination and oppression are the fundamental causes of injustice. In addition, these authors have also emphasized the notion of procedural justice as the relation between justice as equal distribution and justice as proper recognition is played out in the procedural realm. Thus, democratic and participatory decision procedures are both an element of and a condition for social justice (Young, 1990, p.23). Finally, political theorists Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) have tried to develop a “capability” approach to broaden our notion of justice. The central argument of the “capability” approach is that the realization of social justice should go beyond simple distribution and focus on how distributions affect our wellness and social functions. In other words, people should move away from the amount of social goods distributed to them and pay more attention to what these goods

do for them (Sen, 1999). In sum, environmental justice is a multifaceted concept with four intervening spheres: distribution, recognition, participation, and capability. The pursuit of environmental justice requires democratic and participatory decision-making processes that properly recognize and fulfill various social groups' needs.

In line with these theoretical discussions, grassroots movements have further influenced the understanding of environmental justice and adapted it into a collective frame for public mobilization, which offers the potential for a deeper form of engagement as advocated by Lorenzoni et al. (2007). The environmental justice frame moves beyond the information deficit model by emphasizing affective and behavioral engagement and it also involves collective actions. For instance, the impressive success of the U.S. environmental justice movement has been rooted in collective outrage over injustice and political engagement in affected African American communities. More importantly, the concept of environmental justice can function as an effective frame during the process of social movements and appropriate highly salient elements from various successful social movements (Taylor, 2000). As Benford and Snow (2000) argue, framing processes provide a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements. As shown in the development of the environmental movement since the 1960s, the frame of environmental justice has become an appealing frame for activists. The U.S. environmental justice movement successfully connected itself with the civil right movement and the anti-racism movement during that era. This movement further challenged mainstream environmentalism, criticizing the fact that during the 1960s and the 1970s Caucasian leaders and the concerns of affluent urban areas dominated many mainstream environmental groups in the USA.

In recent years, a vibrant global movement has also embraced the environmental justice frame, in which the poor in countries throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Pacific Island nations have joined together to argue for recognition of the disproportionate nature of climate change impacts and a fair distribution of environmental responsibilities (Roberts, 2007). As the Delhi Climate Justice Declaration (2002) states, alliances across states and borders, with participation of the poor and the marginalized of the world, need to be built to oppose climate changes and advocate for sustainable development. Similar themes are also expressed by other international initiatives such as the Bali Principles of Climate Justice (2002) and the People's

Declaration for Climate Justice (2007). Overall, the global climate justice movement has become a growing and significant voice in global environmental politics, showing grassroots efforts to manage climate impacts in more democratic and justified approaches.

## **2.5. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has reviewed the key concepts of environmental communication and discussed four major issues of the current global environmental crises: economic growth, consumerism, public engagement, and environmental justice. The rise of environmental communication is at a historical juncture when environmental decline has penetrated many aspects of our daily lives. However, the hegemony of market values is so pervasive that even limited measures to tackle blind economic growth and consumerism tend to be subsumed within market-based arguments and initiatives. Thus, alternative strategies and action frames, such as the community-based approach for public engagement and the environmental justice frame, are needed for a better understanding of the complicated relations between environmental crises and global political economy. To further elaborate the importance of framing in the current environmental movements, the next chapter will examine previous literature on framing and discuss various theoretical and methodological approaches to framing research.

## **Chapter 3. News Media and the Environment**

News media play a vital role in contemporary environmental issues. It is from news media that we view environmental images, learn environmental risks, and experience environmental disasters. Likewise, continuous and focused media attention is the key to success for many environmental movements. News media influence our attitudes and behavior toward the environment to a large extent, as they are able to present us with particular versions of “reality” (Anderson 1997). As Hansen (2010) points out, “news about the environment, environmental disasters, and environmental issues or problems does not happen by itself, but is rather produced, manufactured, or constructed” (p. 72).

This chapter offers a general picture of the dynamic relationship between news media and environmental issues. More precisely, the chapter has two main purposes. The first is to review news media’s vital role in public affairs through the lens of media effect research. The second is to describe four prominent media frames constructed by current environmental discourse and the basic assumptions behind them. The chapter begins with an overview of the vital role of news media in contemporary environmental issues, especially their function in symbolically constructing “the environment”. It then reviews the “media effect” tradition of communication research and the current elaborations of the “framing” concept in sociological and psychological approaches. The key point is that the concept of framing presents a theoretical complex with two essential distinctions: first, framing differs from agenda-setting; and second, media framing differs from audience framing. Following this conceptualization, the chapter discusses four prominent media frames constructed by current environmental discourses based on the classification offered by Dryzek (2013). Finally, moving toward the methodological perspective, the chapter ends by proposing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an effective approach for decoding media frames.

### **3.1. News Media and the Social Construction of the Environment**

News media offer a crucial space for raising public awareness of the current environmental crisis (Lewis & Boyce, 2009). As the society's primary information channel, news media provide the public with information of environmental issues, engage them in environmental debates, and influence their attitudes on environmental conflicts. These media effects are especially influential in shaping the public's perceptions of issues with which they do not have direct experience. In such situations, news media often act as "gate keepers", elevating the profile of some environmental issues while failing to inform audiences about others. For instance, the public often learns about environmental protests through lens of news cameras instead of personal experiences. Similarly, our understanding of natural disasters and their consequences are usually constructed by relevant news stories. Hajer (1995) and Lester (2010) argue that news media's impacts on environmental issues can be viewed from three perspectives: information provision, mediation, and public engagement.

First, news media are the public's main information source about environmental issues. Science, as a specialized form of knowledge, requires translation in order to be understood by the public and it is widely assumed that news media play a key role in the "translation process" (Ungar, 1998, 2000). For environmental issues with scientific complexity, the public understands them mainly through media coverage rather than education or experience (Nelkin, 1987). Consider climate change: notwithstanding the political controversy around it, modest public awareness on this issue can be partly attributed to its scientific complexity and the difficulty of explaining such complexity in limited news holes (Cox, 2013).

Second, news media mediate environmental conflicts and influence environmental politics. The images, events, and participants covered in environmental news not only provide us with information about the environment, but, more importantly, also construct the "master narratives" through which we make sense of and care about (or ignore) environmental issues. This semiotic perspective of news media draws upon the constructivist view of the dynamic relationship between discourse and power. According to Foucault (1972, 1980), our understanding of "reality" is deeply influenced

by discourse. In particular, the public's understanding of environmental issues is deeply influenced by the discourses of core stakeholders, such as governments, corporations, and ENGOs (Hajer, 1995). Although the popularity and the rise of the global network society (Castells, 2010) has challenged the "discursive monopoly" held by news media, as shown by their loss of market share and public credibility, news media still remains the most important domain through which social-political transformations are managed. In this regard, one determining factor in environmental conflicts is the capacity to control and influence communication flows and networks (Hutchins & Lester, 2011).

Third, news media can both mobilize *and* disempower the public in the context of environmental movements. Protests about environmental issues are invariably waged in and through available media and communications (Cottle, 2013). Embedded in the process of globalization, environmental movements today increasingly need to be understood in relation to endemic forces of change and global crises (Cottle, 2011). According to Hutchins and Lester (2010), the interactions between public engagement and extensive media coverage is crucial for the success of many environmental protests, such as the anti-Northern Gateway Pipeline protests in Canada, the anti-BP protests in the U.S. after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, and the anti-logging protests in Australia (Cox, 2013; Hutchins & Lester, 2011; Lester, 2010). Ensuring adequate representation for one's point of view is a common challenge faced by both corporations and ENGOs: corporations want to manage their public image through carefully crafted public relations strategies while ENGOs seek to attract sympathetic coverage for their critical actions.

In sum, news media play a vital role in environmental issues insofar as they inform, mediate, and engage the public. Such concern reflects the conceptualization of "media effects" from a theoretical perspective, which is a long-dominant paradigm in the research agenda of mass communication.

### **3.2. Framing as a Theory of Media Effects**

The study of media effects has a long tradition in modern communication research. As McQuail (2005) observes, the entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that news media have significant effects on the public life. However, this

claim must be understood as the product of a century-long scholarly debate, within which there have been significant paradigm shifts over time.

The history of research into media effects can be divided into four stages (Scheufele, 1999). The first stage, from the turn of the 20th century to the late 1930s, was dominated by propaganda research and the fear of media power to directly control and manipulate audiences. Lippmann (1922) argued that much of the behavior underlying public opinion is a response to “mental images of events”, an imaginary pseudo-environment created by mass media. This perspective reflected deep concerns about the effects of propaganda effects during this period. The second stage, from the 1930s until the late 1960s, saw the displacement of the strong media effects paradigm in favor of arguments emphasizing the role of “personal influence”. According to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), most people develop their opinions under the influence of “opinion leaders”, who in turn are influenced by the mass media. In this regard, media campaigns rarely change public opinions directly; instead, their principal effect is to reinforce existing attitudes among the public (Klapper, 1960). The third stage, from the 1970s to the early 1980s, marked the return of the strong effects paradigm but with a shift of research focus from observable attitude changes to less-observable cognitive effects. Theories such as “the spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1973) and “agenda-setting” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) proposed that while news media do not directly manipulate the public’s minds, they are successful in the transfer of salience from the mass media’s depictions of the world to those in our heads. This perspective was usefully encapsulated in Cohen’s (1963) famous observation that “mass media may not be successful in telling its readers what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p.13). The fourth and present stage, starting in the early 1980s, is a negotiated paradigm that combines both strong and limited effects. Media discourse is regarded as the product of interactions between news producers and news recipients (McLeod, 2005). The era is also characterized by “social constructivism”, which assumes that particular social realities are constructed by social interactions and shared cultural norms.

The concept of “framing” has become a central paradigm for the investigation of media effects. As with other concepts from communications studies, framing has become a popular idea in both academic and vernacular discourse. Theoretically,

however, there is a lack of consensus on how to define and operationalize framing as an analytic concept. As Entman (1993) suggests, framing presents a “fractured paradigm”, with most studies lacking clear conceptual definitions and relying on context-specific, instead of generally applicable operational processes. A quick survey of the previous theorization attempts has shown a considerable degree of disagreement among framing scholars. For instance, Gitlin (1980) defines framing as “persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, which enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely (and to) package the information for efficient relay to their audiences” (p. 7). Likewise, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) refer to frames as central organizing ideas or story lines that provide meaning to events related to an issue through the application of symbolic devices such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images. For Entman (1993), framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 51-52). Thus, according to Entman the operational process of framing involves four essential steps: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Similar elaborations can be also found in other studies, such as Gamson (1992) and Pan and Kosicki (1993).

If selection and salience are the essential elements of framing, then we have an interesting border dispute between framing and other theories of media effects such as agenda-setting. Indeed, to what extent can concepts such as agenda-setting and framing be combined into one paradigm? For some agenda-setting scholars (e.g. McCombs & Ghanem, 2001), agenda-setting and framing are closely related because of their common focus on mass media impacts on the public agenda; framing is, according to these scholars, “second-level agenda-setting” since it further attributes particular aspects of issues addressed in media agenda. In other words, agenda-setting concerns the salience of certain *topics* in the media agenda while framing concerns the salience of certain *aspects of these topics* (Scheufele, 1999). Paraphrasing Cohen’s (1963) famous dictum, while the media may not tell us what to think, the media are not only stunningly successful in telling us *what to think about* (i.e. agenda-setting) but also in telling us *how to think about it* (i.e. framing). (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

However, the convergence of agenda-setting and framing has been criticized by other media scholars who insist that framing and agenda-setting represent two distinctive approaches to media effect research (Maher, 2001; Scheufele, 2000; Reese, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). First, framing differs from agenda-setting as the two concepts have different theoretical premises (Scheufele, 2000). The theoretical premises of agenda-setting is salience and accessibility. The notion of salience refers to the psychological phenomenon of selective attention. As Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Noble Prize-winning research indicates, perception is reference dependent and, if individuals are situated in ambiguous contexts, the different ways of message presentation can result in very different responses. The idea of accessibility is related to the memory-based model of information processing, which assumes that individuals make judgments about other people and issues based on the accessibility and retrievability of certain information. In this regard, the essential mechanism of agenda-setting is to alter the accessibility of certain issues among public minds by increasing their salience in media coverage, thereby transferring the media agenda to the public agenda.

In contrast, the theoretical premises of framing are salience and attribution. Attribution theory (e.g. Heider, 1959) proposes that human beings cannot understand the world in all its complexity. As a result, it is essential for an individual to infer causal relations between various objects from sensory information. In other words, we all actively classify, organize, and interpret our life experiences to make sense of them and the "schemata of interpretations" used in these process are labeled as "frames" (Goffman, 1974). Differing from the idea of accessibility, attribution theory focuses on the sociological formations of cognition instead of individual cognitive processes. Thus, the theorization of framing is both psychological and sociological. It is the sociological dimension of framing that distinguishes it from agenda-setting<sup>3</sup> (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> In recent years, attempts have been made to theorize "framing" from the perspective of cognitive linguistics (e.g. Lakoff, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Despite the misleading label "cognition", the conceptualization of "framing" offered by these attempts still emphasizes how society contributes to the formation of frames (or metaphors).

Second, framing can be distinguished from agenda-setting insofar as the former tends to emphasize a sense of “organization” or “system”. Framing analysis operates through drawing boundaries, constructing categories, and organizing related ideas into active networks. In contrast, agenda-setting conducts a comparative analysis between the “agenda” of the media and the “agenda” of the public (Reese, 2007). In other words, framing is better understood in the context of the “network society” (Castells, 2010) paradigm rather than the linear “sender-receiver” model. Another key factor of framing is the notion of “context”, within which the operations of frames occur. Framing theorists often study the broader context in which journalism operates (e.g. the political economy of the media industry) whereas agenda-setting researchers do not (Maher, 2001).

Third, the fractured paradigm of framing research suggests that framing should be regarded as a multi-dimensional approach to media research rather than a simple extension of agenda-setting. Framing is a “bridging model” located at the edges of various disciplines and such theoretical diversity can be highly productive in generating new insights into the mass communication process (Reese, 2007). As D’Angelo (2002) argues, framing research can be, at a minimum, conceptualized from within three broad paradigms: critical, cognitive, and constructive. Researchers of the critical paradigm argue that news organizations intentionally select or omit some information due to media bias or political power. Thus critical framing research tends to examine how framing functions to reinforce the status quo of existing liberal capitalist societies, revealing ideologies hidden in discourse. By comparison, scholars working in the cognitive paradigm hold pluralist views of political power and regard news media as respondents to demands for the pluralistic presentation of information. As a result, they tend to use experiments to detect slight variations between different frames of the same topic since these researchers trust the ability of individuals to decode various frames and make decisions based on pluralist opinions. The constructivist paradigm provides a balanced view on framing research. Although this paradigm admits the influences of political and economic factors in news production, it also believes that there exist opportunities for civic engagement. Given the inevitability of frames, it is therefore better to define them as a “tool kit” from which citizens can draw competing opinions to form their own judgments. In other words, constructivists see frames as co-produced by *both* the media and the public, regarding them as strategic actions in public deliberation (Pan & Kosicki,

2001, 2005). In essence, the contrasts among the three paradigms of framing research reflect media scholars' conflicting views on the existence of "mass society" as well as their different perceptions of media power and media bias (Entman, 2007, 2010).

The study of framing can be further divided into media frames and audience frames since framing necessarily involves both the *presentation* of news (by journalists and news organizations) as well as the *comprehension* of news (by audiences). This conceptual distinction follows Schuefele's (1999, 2000) suggestion that different approaches to framing can be classified along a macroscopic level (for media frames) and a microscopic level (for audiences frames). A within-level dimension defines media frames as independent variables whereas audience frames as dependent variables<sup>4</sup>. Based on the two-dimensional distinctions, the various theorizations of framing in previous studies can be regarded as a result of scholars' different focuses on either media or audience. The definitions offered by Gitlin (1980), Entman (1993), and Gamson and Modigliani (1989) tend to emphasize the media perspective of framing whereas the definition elaborated by Pan and Kosicki (1993, 2001, 2005) refers to the audience perspective.

To conclude, how an issue is framed, whether intentionally or not, has important effects. Frames offer both diagnosis and solutions to an issue. To frame is to selectively emphasize certain aspects of an issue and establish the context for particular perceptions and actions. Frames deployed by news media can interact with their audiences' pre-existing schema and values, thereby reinforcing or suppressing specific "worldviews" among the audiences. Drawing upon Entman (2010), Pan & Koscki (2005), and Reese (2007), I define frames as "organizing principles that are socially shared (by the public) and persistent over time, which meaningfully structure the social world through symbolic devices". The process of framing involves four major steps: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. My primary aim, in this thesis, is to apply this perspective on framing to explore and analyze how Chinese media frames environmental issues.

4 See Scheufele (1999) for the dichotomy of framing as independent and dependent variables.

### 3.3. Framing Environmental Crises

To illustrate how framing contributes to the public perception of environmental crises, this section will briefly review the prominent frames constructed by different environmental discourses. Given the complexity of framing, it is impossible to describe all the key elements of environmental frames within this short section. Accordingly, the focus here will be the “defining function” of environmental frames, that is, how frames draw boundaries and construct different “realities” of environmental crises.

Environmental crises do not present themselves in well-labeled boxes. Instead, they are interconnected in various ways and complexly clustered together with other (often non-environmental) issues. Climate change, for instance, can be attributed to many causes such as the loss of tropical forests, increasing private car ownership, the industrialization of the developing countries, and so on. Such complexity leads to the proliferation of perspectives upon environmental crises, and inevitably, the co-existence of multiple environmental frames. According to Dryzek (2013), contemporary discourses about environmental issues can be classified into four categories within a matrix: problem solvers, survivalists, sustainability (believers), and green radicals (Table 1). Given the close connection between discourse and framing, this matrix also provides a conceptual mapping for classifying environmental frames. To be specific, the horizontal dimension of Table 1 indicates people’s perspective on industrial society: those on the reformist side are confident about scientific solutions for environmental hazards while those on the radical side seek a radical divorce from industrialism. The vertical dimension describes people’s views on environmental issues: those with prosaic views believe that existing political and economic structures can effectively mitigate environmental risks, while those with imaginative views believe solving environmental crises will require more utopian solutions. Let us explore each part of this matrix in more detail.

**Table 1: Matrix of environmental discourses**

	Reformist	Radical
Prosaic	Problem-solving	Limits and survival
Imaginative	Sustainability	Green radicalism

*Note.* Adapted from Dryzek, 2013, p. 16

**Limits and survival.** The “limits and survival” frame refers to the worldview that the exponential growth of global population and the accelerating exploitation of natural resources have exceeded the carrying capacity of the earth. Consequently, if no measures are taken, we are heading toward an ultimate environmental apocalypse. Such an alarmist view can be traced back to Malthus’ (1798/1878) theory on population growth. Although Malthusianism has been largely discredited by two centuries of explosive population growth combined with rising living standards, its concern about the ultimate limits of finite natural resources has become a haunting ghost for population biologists, ecologists, as well as some economists. Jevons (1865/1906), for instance, famously argued that, in contrast to what one might expect, technological improvement in efficiency would *not* reduce material through-put in an economic system. Instead, such improvements would actually motivate a dramatically increased rate of resource exploitation and thus an increased overall use of the resource. This so-called “Jevons paradox” raises significant concerns about the prospect that “de-materializing” the economy could ever reconcile infinite economic growth with finite natural resources and capacities. In a similar vein, Garret Hardin (1968) proposes the “tragedy of the commons” in which individuals will accelerate their own personal exploitation of common resources, to the point of ultimately destroying the viability of the resource, in order to maximize their share relative to other users. Hardin’s analysis has become a staple of resource management theory, and clearly influenced *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972), the seminal study for today’s apocalypse views on environmental issues.

Based on computational simulations of the earth’s ecological system with a variety of factors (e.g. population growth, resource use, pollution, etc.), *The Limits to Growth* depicts a grim future for humanity: given the exponential population growth, the limits of resource availability, agricultural productivity, and ecosphere capacity will be reached within 100 years, eventually leading to the collapse of industrial society. The policy prescription following such apocalyptic prediction is straightforward: radical measures for environmental protection and management must be taken to avoid an apocalyptic future. *The Limits to Growth* was published along with the rise of environmental movements in the U.S. and such timely appearance further enhanced the publicity of the book. The discourse of limits and survival has experienced a subtle shift in recent years. For instance, the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (MA) was

released in 2005. Unlike *The Limits to Growth's* emphasis on finite natural resources, the focus of the MA was ecosystems, which added an ecological, systems-based perspective into theorizing the planet's "carrying capacity". Recently, this view has been further developed in the concept of planetary boundaries (Röckström et al. 2009), which argues that there are nine boundaries or thresholds<sup>5</sup> that cannot be violated in order to maintain a "safe operating space for humanity". According to Rockström et al. (2009), we have already exceeded three of the thresholds due to human activities since industrialization: carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, biodiversity loss, and human interference in the nitrogen cycle.

The essential story line of the "limits and survival" frame is that the exponential increase of human demands on the natural world is threatening the carrying capacity of the earth and, as such, immediate and drastic actions is required to sustain the future of human civilization. Following this narrative, the common representations of the "limits and survival" frame in mass media are stories and commentaries on "environmental apocalypse", which usually describe a catastrophic future of human society under the influence of climate change, thereby informing the public of the dangers of climate change as well as to mobilizing them to support environmental movements (Bell, 1994; Risbey, 2008). Such apocalyptic narratives have been adopted by environmentalists for promoting pro-environment political agendas among the public (e.g. Earth First! and Green Peace) and it has been successful in many environmental movements: the devastating scenarios described in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) opened the new era of environmental movements in United States; the images of polar bears on the melting ice caught the world's attention for global warming; the climate crisis described in Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" brought public concern on climate change to a new level. In recent years, such apocalyptic narratives have been adopted by popular culture as well, with movies such as "The Day after Tomorrow" showing devastating disasters and the collapse of human society.

5 The nine boundaries are: (1) carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, (2) ocean acidity, (3) stratospheric ozone, (4) biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, (5) freshwater use, (6) land system change, (7) biodiversity loss, (8) chemical pollution, and (9) Atmospheric aerosol loadings. For detailed explanations of these boundaries, see Rockström et al. (2009).

Despite their prevalence, apocalyptic narratives are often criticized for their failure to provide compelling alternatives and, as such, they can often inspire a fatalistic pessimism that can trigger an emotionally based rejection of environmental issues. Kari Marie Norgaard (2011), for example, conducted extensive research into the emotional barriers that the Norwegian public used to avoid dealing with climate change in everyday life. Her results showed that, despite widely acknowledging the “reality” of climate change, the Norwegian public essentially “live in denial” of the issue given their desire to avoid the negative emotions associated with thinking about it. For the most part, the Norwegian public is well aware of the contradiction that they live a comfortable, first-world life as a consequence of a fossil fuel economy that will, ultimately, cause environmental devastation for people in many developing countries. Under these circumstances, the “environmental apocalypse” triggers emotional rejection that largely inhibits (rather than motivates) political engagement. In short, the “environmental apocalypse” frame has demonstrated limited utility in overcoming the attitude-behavioral gap among the public.

***Problem-solving.*** The “problem-solving” frame is an umbrella frame that includes several different approaches to environmental crises. This frame generally presents a much less apocalyptic view than the “limits and survival” frame, focusing upon pragmatic problem-solving efforts rather than Manichean environmental struggles. The frame acknowledges the existence of environmental crises, but treats them as solvable problems within the current political economy structure of industrial society.

According to Dryzek (2013), discourses belonging to the “problem-solving” frame can be further categorized into three approaches: economic rationalism (leave environmental issues to the market), democratic pragmatism (leave environmental issues to the people), and administrative rationalism (leave environmental issues to the experts). As noted in Chapter Two, these solutions are often very different and even contradictory. For example, economic rationalism champions the free market, rather than government regulations, as the best mechanism for managing natural resources; by comparison, the bureaucratic approach offered by administrative rationalism emphasizes the roles of experts and bureaucratic hierarchy in environmental management. What unites these three approaches, however, is their common acceptance of the structural status quo of liberal capitalism, the subordination of nature to satisfy human needs, and

their emphasis on technology and innovation as the key for managing environmental problems (Dryzek, 2013). Compared with the pessimistic view of industrialization expressed by the “limits and survival” frame, the “problem-solving” frame views the current environmental crises as challenges to the advance of industrial society, but these challenges by no means challenge the validity of industrialization and economic growth as the right way to human prosperity. The “problem-solving” frame proposes that the solutions to the current environmental crises are manifesting specific sectors of the current mechanisms of liberal capitalism (market, democracy, or bureaucracy). As such, all three approaches elaborated in the “problem-solving” frame set “healthy economic growth” as the ultimate goal of solving the environmental crises; in other words, followers of this frame believe that the problems caused by economic growth can and should be solved by economic growth itself.

Problem-solving discourses generally adopt an “enlightenment reasoning” approach to governing the relationship between human societies and nature<sup>6</sup>. This view proposes that human reasoning is conscious, objective, and logical and such rationality has alienated human from nature via the advance of technology (Lakoff, 2010). Nature is largely conceptualized as an “other” that stands apart from (and, occasionally, even “confronts”) human society. This “otherness” further legitimizes human domination and exploitation of nature<sup>7</sup> (Evernden, 1993; Leiss, 1994). In recent years, the rise of neoliberalism has further strengthened this frame as we are invited to think and live as individuals, rather than as collectives, and make individual “rational choices” (Jhally, 2000).

In short, the essential story line of the problem-solving frame is that environmental problems can be solved within the current structures and institutions of liberal capitalism via economic, administrative, and democratic methods. As such, media narratives revealing the “problem-solving” frame often combine environmental messages

6 Dryzek (2013) uses “Promethean Discourse” to describe a similar worldview on the alienation of nature.

7 It is interesting to point out that the construction of “the other” seems to be an extremely powerful framing strategy in constructing environmental as well as political frames, such as the construction of Islam as “the other” in the “war on terror” frame discussed in the previous section.

with hidden legitimations of capitalist ideologies. Advertisements promoting green consumerism, for instance, often put a price tag on nature and obfuscate the domination of nature by capital (Budinsky & Byrant, 2013; Gunster, 2004; Remillard, 2011; Olausson & Ugglå, 2013). Moreover, when the protection of the nature becomes a barrier of economic growth, environmental concerns often give way to the economy following the logic of enlightenment reasoning, as shown in the repetitive appearance of “job versus environment” debates in North American mass media (Boykoff, 2008; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Nisbet, 2007; Young & Dugas, 2011).

**Sustainability.** The “sustainability” frame is arguably the dominant global discourse of ecological concern (Dryzek, 2013). Since the 1980s, this frame has flourished at the international level, covering issues of economic growth and environmental management from the local to the global.

The “sustainability” frame is rooted in the idea of “sustainable development”. The most quoted definition of “sustainable development” comes from the report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987: “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable-to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.8). Likewise, the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio further elaborated: “sustainable development emphasizes a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all levels. It emphasizes not just strong economic performance but intragenerational and intergenerational equity. It rests on integration and a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental goals and objectives in both public and private decision-making”<sup>8</sup>. As the above definitions suggest, sustainable development aims at pursuing economic growth, environmental protection, and global equity simultaneously and mutually. It offers an imaginative vision rather than a prosaic roadmap.

8 <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?menu=62>

Since 1987, the idea of sustainable development has, nominally at least, flourished at the international level. For instance, while the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio disappointed many environmentalists since it did not achieve many tangible agreements and commitments, the conference did formally confirm the nominal commitment of governments around the world to the pursuit (Dryzek, 2013). Many core international institutions have likewise embraced the rhetoric and vision of sustainable development. The World Bank, for instance, has actively promoted the notion of green growth in developing countries and increased its budget for sustainability research (World Bank, 2012).

In Europe, sustainable development has largely taken the form of “ecological modernization”. As reviewed in Chapter Two, ecological modernization proposes that economic development and sustainability can be complementary as long as capitalist political economy is restructured along more environmentally sound lines (Hajer, 1995). In this regard, ecological modernization can be regarded as an implementation of the vision offered by sustainable development. The key component of ecological modernization is conscious and coordinated interventions from governments, as shown in its practitioners (e.g. Finland, Germany, and Japan). Germany, for instance, has accepted the precautionary principle that asserts that scientific uncertainty is not an excuse for inaction on environmental issues. Following this principle, Germany has moved much further and more aggressively than many developed countries (e.g. Britain, Canada, and United States) in dealing with the environmental risks posed by greenhouse gas emissions (Dryzek, 2013).

To sum up, the essential story line of the “sustainability” frame is that capitalist political economy requires substantial reconfiguration and far-sighted planning so that economic growth and environmental protection can be simultaneously pursued. On the one hand, the “sustainability” frame shares many commonalities with the “problem-solving” frame in that both frames view economic growth as a necessity for the prosperity of humanity and both tend to conceptualize nature as a mere adjunct to human society. On the other hand, the “sustainability” frame departs from the Promethean tone of the “problem-solving” frame since it acknowledges the complexity of interactions among production, consumption, resource depletion, and pollution. In this regard, the “sustainability” frame echoes the ideas offered by “reflexive modernization”,

committing to conscious collective control of the political economy in the ecological restructuring of capitalism (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). As the current world is still deeply entrenched by commitments to free trade and deregulation of markets, there are significant barriers in terms of actually translating the vision of “sustainability” into concrete economic and political measures.

**Green radicalism.** The final frame of “green radicalism” refers to imaginative and radical solutions for environmental crises. It encompasses a wide variety of discourses shaped by different thoughts, ideologies, movements, and social groups. Such diversity makes classifying ideas as part of the “green radicalism” frame a difficult task. According to Dryzek (2013), “green radicalism” can be divided into two categories: one focuses upon raising the public’s ecological awareness (green consciousness), the other looks more explicitly to the reform of social institutions (green politics).

The green consciousness discourse proposes that industrial society has generated a warped ideology of the relations between humans and nature. Accordingly, the key to a green future is to change how people experience and regard the world by increasing their ecological awareness and sensibility (Dobson, 2003; Naess, 1973). The precise content of such a sensibility varies in different contexts. In some cases it can be radically conservative, looking back to the naturalist doctrines of religions (e.g. Buddhism and Daoism). In other cases it can be radically innovative, looking forward to an overhaul of modernization (e.g. deep ecology and ecological citizenship). Despite these variations, green consciousness discourses share three commonalities: (1) an anti-anthropocentric stance, (2) a belief in the intrinsic values of nature, and (3) an egalitarian orientation. For instance, deep ecology, as a social movement and a radical thought, proposes two basic principles: a recognition of an ecological “self” beyond the individual person and the pursuit of balance between human and nonhuman interests (Naess, 1973). Deep ecologists take an extremely critical stance toward “human arrogance”, arguing that nature has intrinsic values regardless of human interests (Devall & Session, 1985). As such, green consciousness seeks to establish a less manipulative and humble attitude toward nature among the public. For the most part, however, one must acknowledge that most green consciousness movements are based in wealthy countries, which limits their global influence and leaves the development needs of the global south largely unacknowledged.

By comparison, green politics is about political pro-environment efforts that target social institutions. In contrast to the cultural approach taken by green consciousness, the thoughts and movements of green politics highlight the significance of economic, political, and social structures in solving multifaceted social and ecological crises. Although the radicalism of these thoughts and movements varies significantly (e.g. Green Party vs. Eco-Marxism), they all agree upon the need to confront and transform the current capitalist world order. In this regard, green politics is closely connected with the third wave of social movements (Offe, 1990). According to Offe (1990), there have been three waves of protest in modern societies. The first wave was the protest by liberal capitalists against the rigidities of the feudal system. The second wave was socialist protest against the exploitative and repressive dimensions of capitalism. The third wave, and the current one, is the new social movements (greens, feminists, peace advocates, etc.) that aim to at redefine modern values along the fundamental lines of social progress: freedom, democracy, and equality. The conventional form taken by green politics is the green party, which has achieved a share in the power of government across several countries. The German Green Party, in particular, has been highly successful in pushing the German state in the direction of ecological modernization. At the global level, the most notable practice of green politics is the climate justice movement that proposes “environmentalism of the poor” and fights against global environmental inequalities.

To conclude, the essential story line of the green-radical frame is that addressing current social and ecological crises demands a radical departure from the long-dominant capitalist system: people’s consciousness as well as their behavior must radically change. Over the last four decades, green radicalism has created a comprehensive and systemic critique of industrial society’s shortcomings (Dryzek, 2013). In this regard, green radicalism presents the most revolutionary environmental frame as reviewed above. Yet, facing the tenacious expansion of market liberalism, the path to green radicalism continues to be long and uneasy.

### **3.4. Decoding Frames: A Critical Discourse Approach**

The theoretical complexity of “framing” also contributes to the variation of data analysis methods observed in previous studies on media frames and their effects. On

the topic of climate change and media, for instance, Lockwood (2009) explored media frames of UK climate policy via a quantitative content analysis whereas Shanahan (2009), studying a similar issue, utilized a qualitative interpretation of news reports. Similar variations can be also found in other edited volumes of framing research such as D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010) and Reese, Gandy, and Grant (2001). The methodological variation of previous framing research, however, seems to indicate a methodological obscurity rather than a methodological proliferation. As Reese (2007) points out: "authors (of framing studies) often give an obligatory nod to the literature before proceeding to do whatever they were going to do in the first place" (p. 151). Indeed, for many studies on media frames, it is simply a matter of substituting "frame" for what would have been called "topic" or "theme". It is not uncommon to see many media frame studies take news reports as the basic unit of analysis and use headlines as the caption of their embedded frames. These quantitative studies often follow Tankard's (2001) suggestion that the analysis of frames should be reduced to a "checklist" in order to ensure empirical clarity and precision.

However, quantitative analysis methods tend to neglect three crucial perspectives of framing: the sense of "organization", discussions of "context", and the function of "symbolic devices". The "checklists" used in quantitative framing analysis often fail to capture the sense of "organization", a crucial perspective which distinguishes framing from agenda-setting. Likewise, a reductionist quantitative approach to news texts often leads to the loss of contextual information, an unacceptable price for those framing scholars who emphasize qualitative methods. As frames often derive from symbolic devices hidden "between the lines" of news stories, the subtlety of framing is often "lost in translation" as frames are quantified. Finally, although quantitative framing analysis is able to identify the prominent media frames of a given time, it often fails to investigate how frames are actually constructed through symbolic devices. The analysis of symbolic devices is crucial for framing analysis since it explains the attribution perspective of frames. Frames function by triggering the cognitive schemas of our minds through symbolic devices. Consider the example of the "War on Terror" frame<sup>9</sup>: the remarkable success of this frame in shaping U.S. public consciousness emerges, not

<sup>9</sup> See Reese and Lewis and Reese (2009) for detailed discussion of this media frame.

only from its salience in the news reports of the Post-911 era, but also from its repetitive stimulation of the “sense of security” coded in the mind of the public. In this regard, analyzing symbolic devices is a necessary step for understanding the efficiency of the “War on Terror” frame, which cannot be achieved without a qualitative interpretation of news stories.

To address the limitations of quantitative analysis, this section proposes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a qualitative approach, as a valid and effective venue for exploring media frames. In essence, CDA involves analyzing discursive phenomena from critical perspectives, based upon the assumption that discourses play a key role in the legitimation of inequality and social dominance (Fairclough, 1989). In this regard, the CDA approach aims to excavate, expose and critique the underlying narratives, hidden values, and the hegemonic frames deployed by news media.

Historically, CDA emerged in the early 1990s as a movement following a small symposium held in Amsterdam with presentations by founding figures in CDA: Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Theo van Leeuwen, Ruth Wodak, and Gunther Kress (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The immediate forerunner of CDA is Critical Linguistics (CL), which shifted linguistic analysis away from formal descriptions of language systems to a tool for social critique (Van Leeuwen, 2006). In recent years, there has been an increase of interest in CDA across the humanities and social sciences, as suggested by the increasing number of CDA based publications in academic journals (such as *Discourse and Society*) and participants in relevant international conferences (e.g. Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines).

As a relatively new field, CDA lacks a clear-cut theoretical consensus. In recent years, however, the practitioners of CDA have reached some general agreements with respect to its basic assumptions and operating principles. To be specific, CDA practitioners tend to accept the following research premises: (1) a social-functionalist view of language, (2) a constructivist view of power, domination, and ideology, and (3) an interdisciplinary view of data analysis. First, CDA takes a social-functionalist view of language, defining language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1989). This view originates from the London school of Linguistics (e.g. Firth, 1957), its heir of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) (Halliday, 1985), and the critical linguistics movement

(Fowler, 1979). Specifically, this view regards language as a product of social practices, deeply intervened with economic, political, social, and cultural perspectives of human activities. As Fairclough (1989) argues, “language use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations, and (iii) systems of knowledge and belief” (p.134).

Second, CDA explains that power, domination, and ideology are constructed via discursive practices, which reflects its explicit project of combining critical social theory with language analysis. In general, CDA aims at identifying specific discursive practices and their location within wider processes of social and cultural change (Fairclough, 1993). Although the issues explored in previous CDA research have varied widely, they all fall into the general umbrella of “criticizing or challenging social domination”. CDA draws its theoretical inspiration from two principal theoretical frameworks. The first is the Marxist analysis of power and ideology, as elaborated in Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and the critiques of the cultural industry by the Frankfurt School (e.g. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). The second is the Foucaultian notion of discourse and power (Foucault, 1972, 1980), which posits that specific orders of discourse embody ideological assumptions that legitimize and sustain existing power relations.

Third, CDA follows an interdisciplinary approach to data analysis. As Van Leeuwen (2006) points out, CDA is “not unified by theoretical or methodological paradigms, but by a common goal of criticizing the hegemonic discourses and genres that effect inequalities, injustices, and oppression in contemporary society” (p. 291). CDA extensively draws theories from other disciplines, such as anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, rhetoric, and sociology. As a result, the methodological approaches of CDA studies may vary from each other to a large extent.

Previous CDA research suggests three common operating principles (Fairclough, 1989, 1993; Van Dijk, 1988, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). First, CDA is problem-driven instead of theory-driven. CDA studies usually start from concrete cases rather than theoretical hypotheses. Such research direction is determined by CDA’s social view of language. CDA views language in the construction of social realms and it prefers concrete cases of language performance rather than abstract discussions of language

competence. As a result, CDA studies have a strong tendency to be exploratory and heuristic. Second, CDA focuses on “naturally occurring language”. The naturalness of data is crucial for the validity of CDA as the discipline focuses on the social phenomena embedded in textual presentations rather than the textual presentations themselves. CDA investigates linguistic expressions at the discursive level, concentrating on interpreting meanings “between the lines”. As such, CDA studies often have a top-down tendency, addressing the mapping of various texts’ overall semantic networks. Third, CDA has a strong qualitative orientation in its data analysis. Such orientation is determined by its major goal of reading meanings “between the lines”, which more or less resembles the deep interpretation tradition in hermeneutics and thus is not easy to be achieved by quantitative methods. Although some CDA studies have adopted quantitative analysis methods (e.g. corpus linguistics) to alleviate the drawbacks of quantitative interpretations, this method is still qualitative-based in nature.

The above research premises and operating principles outline the theoretical contour of CDA, which confirms the broad compatibility of CDA with framing analysis. The social constructivist view of CDA highlights the sense of “system” and the symbolic construction of social issues. As such, CDA is able to capture the gist of “organization” neglected in many quantitative framing analyses. Moreover, discussion of contextual information is an indispensable part of any CDA analysis since CDA views language as a product of social practices. Finally, originating from linguistics, CDA is especially adept in decoding symbolic devices embedded in texts. Overall, in contrast to quantitative content analysis, CDA’s emphases on organization, context, and symbolic devices make it a more suitable method for framing analysis.

### **3.5. Chapter Summary**

As shown in the above sections, news media play a key role in contemporary environmental debates due to their influence on public agenda via framing effects. The complexity of contemporary environmental crises has helped produce a proliferation of environmental frames within media discourse, which requires systemic and critical interpretations. As such, Critical Discourse Analysis offers a valuable approach to the analysis of media frames embedded into environmental controversies.

Proceeding from the theoretical framework constructed in the second and third chapters, the remainder of the thesis will now shift to examining the specificity of environmental discourses in China, starting with a review of China's current ecological crises in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4. The Challenges of Greening China**

Environmental issues are one of the most significant topics on China's public agenda today. A keyword search for "environmental pollution" in Baidu (China's leading web search engine) will generate more than five million related news reports in Chinese and the amount is growing every day. China's economy, especially in the coastal areas, has experienced extraordinary growth since the introduction of the "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" in the early 1980s. This 'economic miracle' has improved the living standard of China's 1.3 billion people, but it has also imposed huge pressures upon the country's fragile environment and natural resources. Today, China is facing huge environmental challenges such as overpopulation, land, water and air pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss. The magnitude of these challenges is so large that their impacts can be found even in the most remote areas such as Yunnan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region. The impacts of China's environmental problems have reached far beyond its borders. The pollutants in Beijing's smog, for instance, have been detected in Japan, South Korea, and even the west coast of North America. Clearly, China's massive ecological challenges will not only affect its future prosperity but the very future of the planet.

This chapter examines China's current environmental crises and emerging environmental protection actions taken by the Chinese government and Chinese civil society. The chapter begins with an overview of China's contemporary environmental crises, summarizing the devastating ecological degradation created by overpopulation, rapid industrialization, and urbanization. Next, the chapter reviews domestic environmental protection efforts from both top-down and bottom-up approaches. I argue that both state-led environmental regulations and grassroots environmental movements in China are significantly different from those in the Western context due to China's unique economic, political, social, and cultural factors. Finally, the chapter concludes by situating the issue of environmental justice in the Chinese context and outlining the major challenges for achieving environmental equality in China.

## 4.1. China's Environmental Crises

Although some argue that China's environmental degradation should be traced back to Mao's era or even the late Qing dynasty (e.g. Elvin, 2000; Shapiro, 2001), China's current environmental crises are largely rooted in the extraordinary pace of economic growth the country has experienced in recent decades. A process of industrialization and modernization that took over two centuries in Europe and North America has been accomplished by China in less than 30 years. Consequently, the magnitude, intensity, and scale of China's environmental crises have been much more dramatic than those in the West, leaving little time for the Chinese government and people to respond. Currently, for example, the country is home to 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities and that assessment will likely worsen in the near future (Economy, 2007). Although China has one of the largest fresh water resources in the world, the country is facing serious water shortages due to pollution, inefficient usage, and the skyrocketing demands of industry and agriculture. According to the International Energy Agency, China has surpassed the United States to become the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases in recent years, which attracts criticism from the international community (Li, 2009). Overall, China's environmental crises are so severe that they not only threaten the country's future economic development and public health, but also pose an acute political challenge to the Chinese government (Chen, 2009).

Judith Shapiro (2012) argues that there are five primary drivers of China's current environmental crises (Shapiro, 2012): (1) population increase, (2) rapid industrialization, (3) the growing middle class, (4) urbanization, and (5) globalization. Let us briefly review each factor.

**Population increase.** As the former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao notes: "any small problem multiplied by 1.3 billion will end up being a very big problem" (Downie, Bennett, Pomfret, Pan, & Goodman, 2003). This statement highlights the influence of overpopulation on virtually every issue in China. Between 1949 and the present, China's population has expanded from 600 million to 1.3 billion, and it is projected to reach 1.5 billion by 2030 (World Bank, 2014b). Providing the necessities of life for so many people with limited natural resources presents an ongoing challenge. China has very limited arable land in comparison to its population size. As a result, the Chinese government

has to rely on high-intensity agricultural methods (which are often highly destructive in the long-term) to maintain self-sufficiency in grain production. These efforts have caused serious environmental degradation, particularly in terms of soil erosion, desertification, and overuse of chemical fertilizers (Ash & Edmonds, 2000). In recent years, the situation has become even worse as the country's economic growth has led to the rise of the middle class, which further intensifies the contradiction between population and natural resources in China given their increasing desire for and capacity to afford consumer goods.

**Rapid industrialization.** China's industrial output has been growing swiftly since the economic reforms of the 1980s. Industry is the principal perpetrator of environmental deterioration in China, accounting, for instance, for over 80% of the country's total SO<sub>2</sub> and particulate emissions (Shi & Zhang, 2006). Industrial pollution in China can be attributed to two basic economic sectors. The first is the state-owned enterprises developed during China's initial industrialization era (1953-1978). Originally designed as solely output driven rather than efficiency oriented, many state-owned enterprises (especially those involving heavy industry) are highly polluting in nature and the situation is growing worse given the aging industrial infrastructure. The second sector is private enterprises developed following the market reform in China. In the beginning of the reform, China did not have an effective system for industrial waste management, and this has left many small enterprises (especially township and village enterprises) largely unregulated. Overall, China's environmental management system has done a poor job in mitigating the environmental impacts of rapid industrialization (Shi & Zhang, 2006).

**The growing middle class.** As a direct result of growing material affluence, capitalist life styles and consumer values have become increasingly popular and accessible in China. China's middle class is growing and aspires to eat better food, live in spacious homes, and own automobiles (Shapiro, 2012). Although the definition of "middle class" varies in China's different regions<sup>10</sup>, there is no doubt that the change of consumption patterns in China will further intensify resource extraction, thereby placing extra burdens on the country's already stretched environment. For instance, the middle

<sup>10</sup> A monthly income of 6,000 RMB may be perceived as "middle class" in small cities, but the same income is considered as "working class" in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

class desire for Western lifestyles has greatly increased the sale of commodities such as expensive handbags, shoes, and clothes, which has increased animal poaching in South-western China. Paradoxically, the newly affluent are simultaneously demanding a cleaner, healthier environment, and there has been a significant increase in the “Not-In-My-Backyard” (NIMBY) phenomena in China. In many cases, such pressure only leads to the relocation of toxic industries in poor rural areas, leaving vulnerable communities to suffer the consequences of environmental inequality<sup>11</sup>.

**Urbanization.** Due to historical reasons, the rural-urban division in China, along with the residence restriction system “Hukou”, tends to define rural residents as inferior groups (Perry & Selden, 2010). As a result, many Chinese peasants perceive “being urbanized” as an enhancement of political status. This perception, combined with increasing material affluence and private consumption, is promoting the acceleration of urbanization in China. This urbanization process has many undesirable environmental consequences. The loss of arable land, for example, is directly related to the expansion of cities across China. China has limited arable land availability in comparison to its population size. Urbanization adds to many other factors that similarly threaten China’s arable land. Another prominent environmental problem caused by urbanization is increased city traffic and the accompanying air and sound pollution, especially in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Finally, urbanization also facilitates the expansion of consumerism, with more and more Chinese people embracing the unsustainable capitalist lifestyle.

**Globalization.** It is difficult to accurately estimate the impacts of globalization on China’s environment. Since China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, the country has become the “world’s factory”, with export-oriented manufacturing industries as its leading economic sector. At first glance, the benefits of manufacturing seem to fit China’s needs: with low labor and material costs, developing labor-intensive manufacturing industries was a good option for the Chinese government to manage the unemployment caused by China’s market reform. Overall, the WTO accession has exacerbated China’s already profound environmental challenges, posing a political dilemma that is difficult to resolve

<sup>11</sup> The detailed analysis of NIMBY movements in China will be presented in Chapter Six.

(Jahiel, 2006). Although heavily polluting, capital-intensive industries have decreased in proportion to the economy as a whole, the environmental benefits have been completely offset by the substantial growth of less polluting, labor-intensive sectors (e.g. the textile industry and the automobile industry) – a good example of Jevons Paradox, discussed above in Chapter Three. In addition, the WTO accession also considerably increased foreign investments in China, many of which have been in heavy-polluting industries. Finally, globalization has also encouraged China to seek cheap raw materials overseas for processing at home, causing environmental damage in other parts of the world. One recent example is Chinese capital's expansion in Africa, which has received increasing media attention (Catanzaro & Li, 2014).

In sum, China's current environmental crises are closely connected with the country's enormous economic and political transformations since the 1980s. Alongside the massive increase in material wealth created by China's market reforms, the country is now suffering from serious environmental damage and political instability such as a widening income gap and intensifying consumerism. The Chinese government is facing a real dilemma: its pursuit of developmental policies have dramatically increased environmental harms, intensified socio-economic disparities, and sparked a surge of social discontent. Addressing environmental challenges have become one of the most pressing tasks for the Chinese government, and one that may ultimately determine the very survival of the Communist Party of China.

## **4.2. Environmental Governance in China**

Over the past three decades, political reforms in China have taken the form of a cautious and gradual restructuring, and this is certainly the case in terms of environmental policy and regulation (Mol & Carter, 2006). Environmental governance with market-based approaches has gradually replaced the old soviet approach of "command and control" regulation (Carter & Mol, 2006; Economy, 2006). China faces a number of specific obstacles, however, as it modernizes its system of environmental governance, including: fragmented authoritarianism, weak implementation of environmental policies at the local level, and a stark conflict between environmental objectives and the overriding mandate to promote economic growth. As such, the future

of the country's largely state-led environmental initiatives remains highly uncertain (Edmonds, 2000; Zhang & Barr, 2013).

The Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) is the head of the environmental protection system in China. It replaced the Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in March 2008 during the 11<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress sessions in Beijing, an illustration of the government's increasing attention to environmental issues (Shapiro, 2012). Institutionally, the national regulatory framework is vertically implemented through a four-tier system (i.e. national, provincial, municipal, and county levels), with the latter three levels jointly governed by the MEP and corresponding local authorities (Ma & Ortolano, 2000). Specifically, the Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs) at the provincial, municipal, and county levels are governed by the MEP for their substantial operations (e.g. implementation of "national projects") while their finance and personnel management rely upon their corresponding local governments. This "dual-governance" structure has had profound impacts on EPBs' capacity to implement initiatives from the MEP. As many scholars point out (e.g. Jahiel, 2000; Mol & Carter, 2006; Shapiro, 2012), the major weakness in Chinese environmental governance is the weak implementation of regulations at the local level. Due to financial and personnel restrictions, EPBs are often required to negotiate and compromise with local authorities. For many local authorities, economic growth (often via the construction of capital-intensive and heavily polluting industries) is their main priority as it continues to be the chief source of achievement, legitimacy and promotion for local officials within the Chinese state (Economy, 2010). For many cities (especially small ones), the GDP boost associated with local economic development offers the prospect of quickly alleviating poverty, as well as securing enhanced political leverage for local officials. While the central government may prioritize "ecological modernization", many local authorities continue to emphasize economic growth over environmental protection. Therefore, the relative autonomy of local governments<sup>12</sup> in the environmental realm presents a significant obstacle for its state-led environmentalism. In the energy sector, for example, decentralization and market liberalization in the coal sector have stimulated the

<sup>12</sup> Arguably, such autonomy is due to the fragmented authoritarianism embedded in China's current governance structure.

expansion of small collective and private mines across China (especially in Shanxi Province), bringing a range of economic benefits. However, the mining and combustion of coal imposes significant environmental costs such as land subsidence, water shortages and degradation, air pollution and acid rain (Aden & Sinton, 2006).

China's environmental governance is currently under transition. Three key factors have shaped its evolution over the past decade: (1) the "ecological modernization" championed by the central government, (2) China's accession to WTO in November 2001, and (3) the recent expansion of domestic and international environmental NGOs in China (Jahiel, 2006; Shi & Zhang, 2006). Under the transition, local EPBs and local governments have been granted more freedom in developing environmental priorities, strategies, institutional arrangements and financial models, illustrating increasing decentralization and flexibility within state-led environmentalism (Lo & Tang, 2006). More attempts to balance (and combine) economic growth and environmental protection have been made, such as green GDP, tradable permits of CO<sub>2</sub>, and environmental modal cities (Economy, 2006). The role of policy instruments and environmental legislation is also rising, especially in the regulation of China's rapid industrialization following the implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Law and the policies of Circular Economy (Shi & Zhang, 2006).

Overall, these environmental reforms can be understood as a "specialized ecological modernization process", which resembles but also differs from the ecological modernization experiences in Western countries (Carter & Mol, 2006; Mol, 2006). On the one hand, China's environmental state is indeed developing, shifting away from a rigid command-and-control system of regulation to a partially hands-off approach of environmental governance. This shift has involved the adoption of economic approaches, policy instruments and legislative models borrowed from other countries (especially in Europe). On the other hand, the process of ecological modernization in China differs from the western experience in at least three important and independent ways: the institutionalization of environmental interests (only partially institutionalized in China), the respective roles of state, market, and civil society, and the dynamics of China's other reforms.

### 4.3. Environmental Activism in China

In addition to state-led environmental governance, China is also witnessing an increase in local activism and complaints, and an emerging environmental NGO (ENGO) sector, which shows the increasing significance of civil society<sup>13</sup> in China's environmental politics (Mol & Carter, 2006). ENGOs do not have a long history in China. The first ENGO in the country (Friends of Nature) was established in the mid-1990s. However, the number of ENGOs in China has grown rapidly over the past decade, with over 2,000 registered organizations in 2005<sup>14</sup> (Xie, 2009). China's ENGOs can be divided into three types (Schwartz, 2004): (1) government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) (e.g. China Environmental Fund), (2) independent NGOs (e.g. Friends of Nature), and (3) international NGOs (e.g. World Wide Fund for Nature). Each of these types help bridge the gap between the public and government, serving as an important non-state arena for the development and practice of environmental politics in China (Yang, 2005). But environmental civic engagement is not restricted to civil society: other venues for public participation (e.g. citizen complaints on pollution and green consumerism) have begun to proliferate in China as well (Dong, Ishikawa, Liu, & Hamori, 2011; Martens, 2006).

Compared with environmental movements in Western countries, China's environmental activism tends to be fragmentary, highly localized, and non-confrontational (Hess, 2011; Ho, 2001; Schwartz, 2004). Although the Chinese government acknowledges the contribution of ENGOs, the state has established a very clear bottom line that any nation-wide movement in opposition of the central state will not be tolerated<sup>15</sup>. The registration of NGOs in China is tightly controlled: every legal NGO needs to find a sponsoring unit (often public institutions with governmental ties) and

<sup>13</sup> The term "civil society" is amorphous and has been defined in numerous ways. The current thesis takes the definition in Schwartz (2004), in which "civil society" is identified with three basic criteria: "(1) an intermediate associational realm situated between the state and the building blocks of society (individuals, families and firms); (2) populated by social organizations separate from the state, enjoying a level of autonomy from the state; and (3) formed voluntarily by people to protect or advance their interests and values" (p. 34).

<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to provide an accurate count of ENGOs in China, as many ENGOs are not officially registered due to various reasons. According to Economy's (2010) estimate, there are at least 2,000 unregistered ENGOs in China in addition to the registered ones.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, the Chinese government suppressed the Falun Gong movement after it showed a threat of political stability.

register under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Registration must be renewed annually, with rejection an ever-present possibility (Zhang & Barr, 2013). This tight registration system can partially explain the existence and dominance of “government organized non-governmental organizations” (GONGOs) in Chinese “civil society”. Other issues such as the lack of funding and training for participants also restrict Chinese ENGOs. Due to these constraints, Chinese ENGOs tend to keep a low, non-confrontational profile, rarely establishing regional affiliations or campaigning to increase membership. Consequently, Chinese ENGOs are limited in their capacity to influence environmental politics. Their major activities are generally limited to awareness raising, public education, and hands-on environmental protection activities (Shapiro, 2012).

Another feature of Chinese ENGOs is their heavy reliance on celebrities and personal networks. Many use personal networks to mobilize, to influence state policies, and to achieve their goals, especially those that are founded by celebrities. For instance, the success of the Beijing-based ENGO Friends of Nature’s is closely associated with its founder Congjie Liang<sup>16</sup> and his personal connections with Beijing’s local government and academic communities (Zhang & Barr, 2013). As Xie (2009) suggests, the developmental path of many ENGOs in China differs from how NGOs tend to develop in a Western context: Chinese ENGOs (especially small ones) have a relatively low level of formality and a heavy reliance upon personal networks, often barely developing into formal organizations. Xie (2009) attributes these characteristics to the lack of political openness in China, the financial challenges of Chinese ENGOs, and cultural factors (e.g. the significance of personal relations). The reliance upon personal networks means that the survival of particular organizations can be jeopardized by the departure of their founders. In the case of the Friends of Nature, for example, the organization experienced significant difficulties when its founder passed away in 2010 (Xie, 2009).

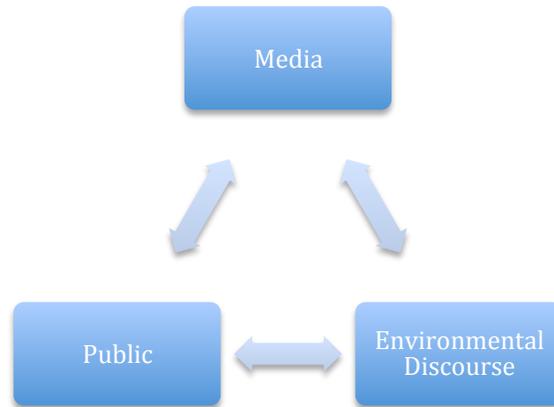
However, emphasizing these restrictions paints an incomplete picture of Chinese social activism. As Ho and Edmonds (2006) point out, Chinese state-society relations should be interpreted as a kind of “negotiated symbiosis” rather than the former dictating

<sup>16</sup> Liang’s family is one of the most respected scholar families in China. His grandfather is Qichao Liang, a very important scholar, journalist, philosopher and reformist in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican China.

the latter. China's economic, political, and social reforms have created multiple "grey areas" for social movement activity and expression. State-society relations are exemplary of what Karl Polanyi (1944) famously described as "embeddedness". The concept was first used in economic sociology to denote the idea that economic action is more than simply a function of prices and markets; it also critically depends on the wider socio-political, cultural, and historical context (Granovetter, 1984). The concept of "embeddedness" has been applied in various disciplines of the social sciences, emphasizing the significance of contexts and networks in social activities. In the case of Chinese environmental activism, ENGOs are "restricted but liberated" (Ho & Edmonds, 2006). Formally, China's semi-authoritarian context leaves little space for associations that are independent of the state. As a result, China's social activists have adopted a diffuse and informal network of relations (as shown in Xie, 2009). While this informal web of relations differs considerably from "green social movements" in Western countries, it has also undeniably acquired social and political legitimacy in China. The non-confrontational frame has ensured the survival of many ENGOs over the long run and their cooperative attitude has helped ENGOs to earn a certain degree of legitimacy in the central government's eyes.

The swift development and expansion of the Internet, as a communication tool and a public space, has had a significant positive effect on environmental activism in China (Yang, 2010; Zhang & Barr, 2013). China's online activism is flourishing (as shown in the increase of various ENGOs in China) and Yang has argued that the "co-evolution" of environmentalism and the Internet in the mid-1990s was not coincidental (Yang, 2005). In China, environmental websites created by government agencies, research centers, and ENGOs are growing exponentially, along with mushrooming personal homepages, blogs, and social media accounts on environmental topics (Yang, 2003). In particular, Chinese ENGOs increasingly rely upon the Internet for their activities as Internet technologies effectively empower resource-poor activists in their self-presentation, information brokering, network building, and public engagement (Sima, 2011; Zhang & Barr, 2013). Furthermore, online environmental activities in China are increasingly connected and a virtual environmental network is emerging (Sullivan & Xie, 2009). Yang and Calhoun (2007) argue that the growth of such online activities indicates the rise of a green public sphere in China, consisting of critical environmental discourse,

the media carrying such discourse, and publics engaged in the communications. Figure 2 illustrates this argument:



**Figure 2: Green public sphere in China (adapted from Yang & Calhoun, 2007)**

To sum up, a fledging environmental activism is emerging in China along with the rise of civil society and the development of Internet technologies. In contrast to the confrontational approach used in Western social movements, China's environmental activism is embedded within a semi-authoritarian political context and tends to adopt a non-confrontational approach as compared to many Western ENGOs. Admittedly, such an approach demonstrates a certain degree of complicity/subordination of environmental activism to state/party objectives, which has its own shortcomings. However, the non-confrontational approach might be the only approach in the current Chinese political context that not only ensures the existence of ENGOs in China but also creates a unique legitimacy and promotes the development of Chinese environmental activism in the long run.

#### **4.4. Environmental Justice in China**

In contemporary China, dramatic social and economic transformation is increasingly accompanied by resistance, in which grievances connected to social injustice occasionally explode into conflict (Perry & Seldon, 2010). The concept of justice has deep roots in both traditional Chinese culture as well as the socialist legacy of communist revolution. The socialist idealism during Mao's era, for instance, emphasized the equality of economic and political status of every Chinese citizen. It is the pursuit of

justice – fuelled by both the perception and the experience of inequality -- that drives many dissident movements in China, from peasants' struggles against the demolition of homes and villages to workers' protests against unhealthy working conditions and capitalist exploitation. Similarly, the pursuit of justice is becoming a crucial factor in China's environmental activism: more and more public environmental protests are associated with the disproportionate experience (or displacement) of environmental harms, the neglect of minority groups' rights, or the exclusion of public participation in decision-making (Economy, 2010; Shapiro, 2012; Zhang & Barr, 2013). Beyond the growth of a "green public sphere", it appears that an "environmental justice paradigm" is also rapidly emerging in China.

Similar to environmental justice movements in other countries, the primary concerns with respect to environmental justice in China are the fair distribution of environmental benefits and, more importantly, the exposure to risk and harm that are highly unevenly distributed across China. While certain elements of Chinese society enjoy the affluence brought by the economic miracle, other elements are increasingly suffering from the negative ecological impacts intensified by development. According to Shapiro (2012), environmental injustice in China largely occurs along three axes: the East-West divide, the Han-Minority divide, and the Urban-Rural divide.

- *East-West divide.* While the economic divisions between Eastern and Western China are a consequence of a wide variety of factors, these divisions have been greatly exacerbated by China's economic growth since the 1980s. Western China, with abundant natural resources, has gradually become the supplier of raw material and energy for the coastal region during the economic transformation. Eastern China, especially the coastal cities, has received far more benefits from economic development due to its advantages in labor force and transportation. As a consequence, the impacts of environmental degradation (without the benefits of economic development) are much worse in Western China.
- *Han-Minority divide.* The uneven distribution of environmental harms and economic benefits is also evident from the racial perspective. The majority of China's minority groups reside in the country's Western region, which has an underdeveloped economy and is the home to many fragile ecological systems. In recent years, tough

environmental policies have been implemented across Western China since many areas in this region (Xinjiang, Yunnan, and Tibet) are crucial to the integrity of China's ecological systems. These policies further prevent economic growth in West China and expand the Han-Minority divide.

- *Urban-Rural divide.* Although China's urban population surpassed its rural population in 2011, a considerable proportion of China's urban population (over 200 million people) are migrant workers from rural areas, especially in the large cities of East China such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou). This large "floating population" in big cities is a clear indicator of the huge economic gap between China's urban and rural areas. For centuries, hardworking peasants who relied on agriculture as their primary income source have occupied China's rural areas. Compared with the industrial and service sectors, the agricultural sector has received the lowest level of benefits from China's economic reforms, further deepening the urban-rural economic gap. Moreover, the flourishing of township and village enterprises has created severe pollution problems in many towns and villages of China as a result of the illegal disposal of industrial waste. The growth of NIMBY movements in urban areas has displaced heavily polluting industries to rural districts with less economic and political power.

It is important to note that these divides are closely interrelated with each other and their origins can be traced to both historical considerations as well as regional variations. One typical case demonstrating these divides is the campaign to stop dam construction on the Nu River in 2004 (Yang & Calhoun, 2007). The hydropower project on the Nu River was originally designed as a series of 13 dams to be built on the lower reaches of the river, which fell within Yunnan Province, a region with a largely undeveloped economy, abundant natural resources, and a large minority population (Hathaway, 2013). Yunnan's desire for the hydropower project was largely driven by economic considerations. Supporters of the project argued that it would help alleviate the poverty of the river valley regions and accelerate economic development throughout the entire province. But the project also triggered environmental concerns given that the Nu River valley contains precious ecological treasures of breath-taking natural beauty and biodiversity, which would have been threatened by the completion of the hydropower project. Ultimately, China's State Council halted the hydropower project

after intense public debates. However, left unanswered was the question of whether villagers living along the Nu River (many of them belong to minority groups) should be compensated for their sacrifice of giving up the chance of development<sup>17</sup>.

## **4.5. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has reviewed the challenges of greening China. In the past three decades, China's economic growth has transformed the country from a poor, largely undeveloped country into a global economic powerhouse. However, this impressive transformation has come with a severe environmental price. Environmental degradation has attracted attention from both state and non-state actors, and the state has gradually implemented enhanced environmental protection measures. Unfortunately, China's semi-authoritarian political system and the persistence of environmental injustice have overshadowed the country's ecological modernization process and the future of China's environment, whether green or grey, is still unknown. However, hope still exists. The rise of a green public sphere in China is showing the increasing significance of media in China's environmental debates and it is not an exaggeration to say that the success of greening China will depend on the discursive battles in Chinese media. The next chapter reviews the Chinese media system and the media-environment relation.

<sup>17</sup> See "Waking the Green Tiger" (Carson & Marcuse, 2011) for more details of the Nu River protests.

## **Chapter 5. The Global and the National of Chinese Media**

In the post-Tiananmen era, China has been caught in the crosscurrent of globalization and nationalism. On the one hand, China has embraced global capitalism in order to “save” socialism, which has produced both an economic miracle as well as an increasingly extreme polarization between social classes. On the other hand, as evidenced by the increase of diplomatic disputes between China and its neighbor countries, there has been a steady rise of popular nationalism in China, which has raised alarm bells for some Western observers (Kinnvall & Jönsson, 2002). It is no exaggeration to say that media plays a central role in the many ongoing public debates in China. In an era of network society that embraces a diversity of media platforms, it is difficult to conclusively evaluate the impacts of China’s media system, especially since the swift expansion in the country’s information and communication technology sector since the turn of the century. Meanwhile, China has witnessed a dramatic increase of public “incidents” related to environmental issues, and this poses new challenges for journalists within China’s media system. How these environmental struggles are covered and framed within Chinese media will exercise a huge influence over China’s environmental future.

This chapter begins by reviewing the nature of the Chinese media system with a focus upon how it is shaped by China’s complex political economy. It aims to outline the major ambiguities and contradictions within the Chinese media system, which will help establish the foundation for the ensuing case studies. We will start by reviewing the growth of nationalism and neoliberalism in China, two key factors which continue to shape Chinese media’s ecology, discourse, and market. In the second section, we will examine the market reforms of the Chinese media system, focusing upon the intertwining of the “party line” with the “bottom line” of the market that determine Chinese media practices and structures. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing how these practices and structures shape environmental journalism in contemporary China.

## 5.1. National Pride and Patriotic Nationalism

The year 1989 was a historical watershed; nearly a century of socialist experimentation came to an end and two worlds finally became one: a global capitalist world (Wang, 1998). Although China's socialism did not collapse in the manner of the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, China accelerated the process of capitalist globalization in the spheres of economy, production, and trade through deepening its "open and reform policy". Indeed, the government's formal ongoing commitment to socialism sits rather uneasily with the reality of contemporary China: the country appears to have almost completely embraced the logic of capitalism and markets in many of its economic, political, and even cultural fields.

For many Chinese (especially the burgeoning middle class in urban areas), there is no socialism in China any more: all that remain are the socialist legacy and the Communist Party (henceforth the Party), a gigantic organization with tremendous power and resources (Lee, 2003). The "open and reform" policy not only altered the landscape of China's political economy, but also raised questions about the Party's rhetoric. Reviewing comments on Party-related news sites, it is evident that many propaganda-weary Chinese netizens do not trust the statements made by officials. Indeed, such statements are commonly ignored or even ridiculed, which presents a worrying situation as the critiques directed toward the government tends to be subversive instead of constructive. There are, however, two exceptional situations when the population – and even some overseas dissidents – embrace the Party's discourse: the first is when China's national sovereignty is "infringed" upon by foreign forces; the second is when China flexes its muscles in order to secure global recognition for its rising international status (Chan, 2001). Faced with the hollowing out of revolutionary idealism, the Party has increasingly turned to economic growth and nationalism to legitimize its governance in the post-Cold War, neoliberal world order (Sandby-Thomas, 2011). As such, expressions of "wounded nation" and "national face" have become two dominant themes of Chinese media discourse, especially in stories related to international affairs.

**Patriotic nationalism.** "Patriotic nationalism" is the key to many Chinese policies, especially those related to foreign affairs. In line with the conventional view that nation and nationalism are associated with the conceptualization of imagined or abstract

communities (e.g. Benedict, 2006; Paul, 1996), patriotic nationalism in contemporary China is a product of both top-down and bottom-up efforts, namely a combination of state-sanctioned nationalism and a more virulent populist reactive nationalism. The convergence of these two forms of nationalism is driven by historical memories of a weak and divided China which was historically victimized by foreign powers for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lee, 2003). Many Chinese take national pride and self-confidence from China's historical domination of the world for over one millennium<sup>18</sup>: China was once "the only civilization under heaven" and it is now, again, assuming its rightful position of global leadership. In this context, Chinese media often portray the country as encircled by an ocean of potential enemies (especially Japan and the United States), who are desperate to sabotage the growing status and influence of China.

In China, the boundary between nation and state is often porous, as is the boundary between party and state. As Chan (2001) suggests: "patriotic nationalism blurs the boundaries between nation and state while exhibiting a high propensity toward aggression" (p. 182). Indeed, one key shift in Party rhetoric since the 16<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party Congress (2002) is that the Party is representing "the development trend of China's most advanced productive forces" as well as "the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people" (Jiang, 2013). Such re-definition of the Party's role can be seen as reducing the class emphasis of the Party, transforming it into a representative and ally of multiple social classes in China (Dickson, 2003). As the Party represents the entire nation, it can rely upon the support of the whole population: if you love the nation, you should support the Party and the state that is governed by it.

The rise of patriotic nationalism in China can also be read as a popular reaction against neoliberal globalization. As Zhao (2008) points out, the incorporation of transnational capital into China's different economic sectors primarily serves the interests of Chinese elites and, therefore, tends to "aggravate the political economic and cultural contradictions of China's re-articulation with an American-dominated global capitalism" (p. 166). In this regard, the critique of Chinese nationalism as *simply* party propaganda only presents one side of the complete picture. It neglects how national

<sup>18</sup> Tan Dynasty to the middle age of Qing Dynasty

sentiment can reflect genuine expressions of concern from the Chinese public (Gries, 2004). Indeed, in a globally reintegrated China, the boundaries between the East and the West, or the Chinese people and the foreigners is increasingly blurred, which in turn leads to “complicated articulations of nationalist, class, regional, and generational politics” (Zhao, 2008, 167). Under such circumstances, the interpretation of China’s nationalism must delve beyond the official rationale of ideological legitimation, and both the internal and external conditions behind the rise of popular nationalist discourse in China should be taken into consideration.

Chinese media is the meeting ground of state-sponsored nationalism and populist reactive nationalism. Focusing on “the other” not only affirms the state-defined boundaries between “us” and “them” but also serves to divert public attention away from domestic discontent (Sandby-Thomas, 2011). As such, it is no wonder that international news in China is largely constructed around notions of “national sovereignty” and “national identity”. As mentioned earlier, discourse on national sovereignty in China is rooted in the wounded national pride and bitterness that were adopted by the Chinese government following the Tiananmen crisis in order to generate “patriotism” among the Chinese public (Zhao, 1998, 2008). Such national campaigns aim to create a “state-sponsored cultural nationalism” that legitimizes the Chinese government by glorifying its history, promoting its policies, and depicting China’s bright future (Kinnvall & Jönsson, 2002; Sandby-Thomas, 2011).

In China, the promotion of national sovereignty is often mediated through discussions about key threats to “national identity”. According to Hardt-Mautner (1995), national identity emerges very much as a relational concept: the construction of “self” is heavily dependent on the construction of “other”. As a result, the promotion of nationalism is often accomplished by the creation of an internal or external “common enemy” that can only be defeated if and when the nation is united. Such strategy is particularly prevalent in news stories on social and political controversies. For instance, Juan Li (2009) found that Chinese media frequently adopted the common enemy frame during the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade (May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999) and the Hainan spy plane incident (March 31<sup>th</sup>, 2001), which subsequently led to massive anti-US movements. Recently, China’s dispute with Japan over the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has also generated a resurgence of nationalist sentiment

against Japan and the United States, which has been influenced by the portrait of Japan as an irreconcilable enemy in some Chinese news media as well. Through these incidents we can see two seemingly contradictory modes of China: a xenophobic China with a sense of inferiority rooted in the country's bitter history and poor population<sup>19</sup> and a narcissist China with a glorified past and the ambition of leading the world.

Perhaps the most interesting example of China's patriotic nationalism is the country's complicated attitude toward the United States. Anti-Americanism is widely shared by the Chinese public. Nonetheless, it is unfair to simply characterize this as a relation dominated by hatred: after all, one cannot forget the strong pro-American sentiment in China during the 1980s (as a result of the two countries' strategic alliance against the Soviet Union) or deny the increasingly close economic connections between the two countries. Recently, Yuezhi Zhao (2014) has, for example, explored the "Chimerica"<sup>20</sup> phenomenon. In other words, the Chinese public, especially its young population, manifest an interesting ambivalence toward the United States. On the one hand, there is a highly negative view of American hegemony abroad; but, on the other hand, there is a largely positive view of American domestic life styles (Rosen, 2003). These two disparate images of the United States are shared by many other populations given the combination of certain progressive aspects of the country's policies and culture together with an often arrogant and highly illiberal disposition towards other nations (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). China's complicated attitude toward the United States, however, is also clearly connected with China's self-imagination. One might say that the Chinese public sees the shadow of China's glorified past in today's America, the only "civilization under heaven" in contemporary society. As such, America can play the role of both the angel and demon simultaneously<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Even as the world's second largest economy, China's GDP per-capita is only \$6,091 whereas the United States' figure is \$51,748 (World Bank, 2014a).

<sup>20</sup> "Chimerica" describes the interconnected U.S. and Chinese economy in the triumph of a new neoliberal world order. See Zhao (2014) for detailed discussions.

<sup>21</sup> One interesting fact is that despite the constant diplomatic uproars between China and America, America is still the most attractive country for Chinese immigrants and international students.

**National face.** In a complementary fashion, media stories about China's achievements on the world stage promote China's "national face" and offer opportunities for the exhibition of national triumphalism and the celebration of patriotic nationalism. For the Chinese state, the significance of international events showing the success of China cannot be measured in terms of economic costs and benefits; instead, they are part of a national identity politics of national face, pride, and dignity (Lee, 2003). China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), for instance, was widely reported by Chinese media in the 1990s, commonly defined as China's "return to the world". As Harris (1997) argues, the reformed Chinese state perceived the WTO membership as a restoration of the nation's rightful place in the international system, situating the event in the larger context of China's historical humiliations. Even though the actual content of the WTO agreement was rarely described in news stories and the voices of Chinese peasants and workers (who were the most impacted by the WTO membership) were systemically neglected, the Chinese press celebrated the membership of WTO as if it was China's only choice to rejoin the "civilized world" (Zhao, 2003).

Another representative case of national celebration was Beijing's successful bid to stage the 2008 Olympics. Compared with China's accession to WTO, the 2008 Olympics barely influenced the daily lives of ordinary Chinese and the benefits it brought to them were meager at best. Sports, as media events, are ceremonial politics expressing the yearning for togetherness and fusion (Dayan & Katz, 1992). For the Chinese state, the Olympics offered an excellent opportunity to showcase the nation's progress and international status to world and a convincing justification of the "open and reform" policy; for ordinary Chinese, the Olympics provided an ideal opportunity for national triumphalism (Polumbaum, 2003). As such, Chinese media's narratives of the 2008 Olympics – the process leading up to the Games, the staging of the events, and the aftermath – were unified under the flag of nationalism, representing the Olympics as the nation's entitlement and destiny (Polumbaum, 2003).

China's accession to the WTO and Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics were both exemplary of all the elements of "globalization", showing China's eagerness and success in entering the order of global capitalism. As a result, Chinese media present the country's entry into global capitalism as if it was China's only option (Polumbaum, 2003; Zhao, 2003). However, as Sen (2001) says of globalization, it is a gross injustice

when the majority of the benefits go into the pockets of developed countries. Unfortunately, such anti-globalization voices did not appear in Chinese media's discussions on either WTO or Olympics, evidence of what Bourdieu (2001) has called "the imperialism of the universal", a particular model of globalization (Western centrism) as a universal necessity, which in fact only benefits the dominant.

Chinese media's narratives on China's accession to the WTO and Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics need to be situated in the broader context of "the neoliberal revolution" and the forging of the "market state" in the global political economy (Zhao, 2008). Neoliberalism, as the defining movement of our age, has been understood as a form of governmentality that aims at extending the market logic into politics and society (Robinson, 2006). According to Harvey (2005), Chinese political economy in the reform-era is marked by the increasing incorporation of neoliberal elements along with authoritarian control, presenting "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics". Although China does not openly describe itself as a neoliberal capitalist state and the historical and ideological legacy of socialism remains strong in China, there is no doubt that the Chinese media system and its discourse have been deeply influenced by neoliberal ideas (Zhao, 2008). Let us explore this dynamic further.

## **5.2. Chinese Media System: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line**

Under the circumstances of authoritarian neoliberalism, media reform in China is characterized by the juxtaposition of the party line and the market line (Hachten & Scotton, 2010; Donald & Keane 2001; Stockmann 2013; Zhao, 1998, 2008). If democratization was the key theme in struggles for media reform in 1989, commercialization has become the order of the day since 1992 when market forces started to rapidly penetrate every aspect of Chinese media. As a result, advertising, commercial sponsorships, financial reports, TV-shopping channels began to mushroom in China's media landscape (Zhao, 1998, 2008). On the other hand, despite the breathtaking speed of commercialization, journalism in China remains quite static in many aspects: in particular, the Party still controls the "commanding height" and regards media as its mouthpiece, which often leads to blunt forms of censorship (Zhao, 2008). Thus,

Chinese media in the reform era are in the paradoxical situation of undergoing transformation while remaining the same: the “open and reform” policy brought market logic into Party-censored media and produced a series of journalism reforms. Nevertheless, the suppression of liberal discourse in 1989 and the persistence of censorship practices since that time demonstrate the Party’s persistent control over the media system (Zhao, 1998, 2008). The current mix of market logic and Party logic, in short, is the defining feature of China’s media system, a system full of contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities (Zhao, 2008).

Given the significance of marketization in today’s Chinese media system, some definitional clarifications are needed. The marketization of Chinese media can be categorized into three developments: deregulation, commercialization, and privatization (Stockmann, 2013). Deregulation refers to the process of diminishing intervention by the state in media organizations. It essentially involves the construction of less regulated communication systems, which is visible in areas such as licensing, personnel appointment, management, and daily operations (Mulgan, 1991). In China, deregulation is often referred as decentralization, and there is a noteworthy parallel between this process in media and the restructuring of environmental management described earlier.

Commercialization is the driving force behind media marketization. Commercialization describes the shift of media’s primary goal from serving the public to pursuing profit. In China, as many media shifted from being fully funded by state subsidies to dependence upon advertising revenues, these media have had to reorient their content and become more responsive to audience demands (Zhao, 1998).

Privatization is the process of transferring property from public ownership to private ownership. Privatization is partial in China’s media industries due to the requirements of the party line. In China, private investment in certain media sectors (e.g. the film industry) is allowed up to 49%, with the remaining share still belonging to the Party (Stockmann, 2013).

International capital is an important factor in the marketization process of Chinese media system, especially after China’s accession to WTO in 2001. As media conglomerates have become increasingly globalized and have prospered from the global

economic deregulation in the post-Cold War era, they are eager to move into China in order to exploit the country's enormous media market (Bagdikian, 2000; Downing, 2011). As part of China's acquisition of WTO membership, it was required to open up various sectors of its media and telecommunications markets for foreign investment (Zhao, 2008). The only two exceptions are newsprint and news media, which receive the most attention from the Party's censorship system. As evident in the explosive growth of Western content in China's media landscape today (especially in the Internet sector), foreign investment has clearly generated a radical transformation in the daily media experience of Chinese audiences.

Confronting competition from global capital, China's national response has been to "attack poison with position", namely organizing state-owned media conglomerates to compete with international media conglomerates (Zhao, 1998, 2008). Not surprisingly, these Chinese media conglomerates have imitated western media content by trivializing serious journalism and providing an increasing quotient of infotainment, gossip, and entertainment for the instant gratification of mass consumers (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). As a result, the traditional line between news and entertainment has become blurred in China, similar to what has happened globally (McChesney, 1999). One representative case is the rapid growth of the Huan Radio, TV, and Film Group since 2000s. By importing international entertainment shows (primarily from Japan, Korea, and the United States) and creating domestic copycats, this media conglomerate has become the first stop of TV entertainment of many Chinese youths. Overall, the changes and reforms of Chinese media can be elaborated as follows (Table 2):

**Table 2: Changes and reforms of Chinese media system**

	Pre-reform	1980-1999	2000-
Economic system	Command economy	Market reform, gradual decentralization of management	State capitalism, authoritarian liberalism
Media regulation	Engineer state model	Deregulation and gradual diminution of subvention for media industries	Architect state model (state facilitates regulatory guidelines for investment in infrastructure)
Social stratification	Egalitarian	New middle class with economic capital; social capital residing	Emerging digital divide, increasing economic stratification

Function of media	Propaganda, engagement of masses	in bureaucrats Pedagogic/reform of attitudes and conduct (spiritual civilization)	Informational, provision of repertoire of cultural choices
Types of media	Print, posters, radio, loudspeaker networks, film, terrestrial TV	On-line news, chat rooms, pay and satellite platforms, DVD, VCD, cellular telephones	Broadband cable, digital TV, WAPs, iMODE, new media technologies
Media characteristic	Mass line, cultural despotism	Diversification, shift to entertainment function and entrepreneurial self-sufficiency	Convergence, internationalization of content
Crisis	Establishing control, controlling factions within the press, making the media into the “mouthpiece”	Coming to terms with the costs of maintaining a public media infrastructure; Increasing tensions among media workers and problems of maintaining the traditional role of the media	The high cost of upgrading technological infrastructure; the threats of foreign content and the impact of WTO accession; controlling the technology of the Internet

*Note.* Adapted from Donald and Keane, 2001, p.6

The coexistence of market and party logics has profoundly influenced China’s journalist practices. As numerous studies have suggested (e.g. Hachten, 2010; Pan & Lu, 2003), one common challenge faced by news editors in China is trying to stay on the right side of government authorities: while the market line is quite clear, the party line can often be quite obscure and, as a result, many editorial decisions are based on self-censorship and wild guesses. While leading Chinese press will occasionally expose scandals and corrupt officials, such practices can be very risky (Hachten, 2010). Media coverage of the recent Bo Xilai saga, for instance, can be largely attributed to political struggles within the Party, rather than the bravery of some “deep-throat” informants (Zhao, 2012).

Meanwhile, the marketization trend has forced many media in China to reorient their content, leading to an explosion of programs and stories that celebrate consumerism and instant gratification. As Zhao (2002) argues, the undertones of neoliberal discourse could even be found in the 1990s tabloids stacked on street newspaper-stands across China, in which crime, sex, and scandals were all turned into

sensational stories. Even the Xinhua news agency and Central China Television (CCTV), the Party's official mouthpieces, have joined the race of marketization and enjoyed enormous profit from their monopolistic status in China's media system (Cooper-Chen & Liang, 2010; Chan, 2003). *Global Times*, a daily Chinese tabloid under the auspices of the *People's Daily* has achieved a huge market success. As a profit-driven newspaper, *Global Times* has received critiques for its pursuit of eye-catching effects by agitating nationalistic expressions. For example, China's recent diplomatic disputes with neighbor countries have led to an increase of *Global Times*' reports on China's military power.

Similarly, CCTV has dramatically expanded its entertainment programming and the time devoted to advertising and promotional features. For instance, the annual performance gala broadcast by CCTV on China's lunar New Year's Eve, with nearly 70% of the national total viewership, has become an extremely profitable program for CCTV with millions of dollars spent on advertisements during the program (Cooper-Chen & Liang, 2010). Another recent case showing CCTV's hunger for profit is the channel's decision to air *Big Bang Theory* and *Game of Thrones*. Both *Big Bang Theory* and *Game of Thrones* have enjoyed a phenomenal spectatorship among Chinese netizens (legally as well as illegally). However, China's State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT) has banned both shows recently, though not, as it turns out, due to ideological considerations. Shortly after SARFT's decision, CCTV announced that it would import both shows and air them through its international TV drama channel. Given the fact that there is no rating-system for films and TV programs in China, both *Big Bang Theory* and *Game of Thrones* (rated "A" for adult audience in the United States) would be openly watched by Chinese adolescents on CCTV, a channel that was once filled with socialist idealism and "patriotic programs". Such phenomena suggest that, soon, market logic may even overturn the party logic and become the only infallible law of Chinese media.

The introduction of market logic and global capital, however, has also introduced western models of media professionalism into China, especially in the coverage of massive natural disasters such as the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 (Hachten & Scotton, 2010). As Pan and Lu (2003) point out, under different media systems, journalists are plugged into various political and economic structures while performing the daily practices of gathering and disseminating news. Due to the unique political and economic

system of Chinese media, professionalism for Chinese journalists is more or less a myth instead of a series of practical codes or guidelines (Polumbaum, 1990; Zhao, 2000). In many cases, the restrictions of both market logic and party logic limit the realization of serious journalism in China. However, Chinese journalists also use a variety of discursive resources in their everyday practices as “tactics” to evade, appropriate, and even resist the restrictions imposed by both market and party power (Pan & Lu, 2003). Such “overt compliance and covert evasion” follows the idea of “tactics” (de Certeau, 1984) or “improvisatory performances” (Bourdieu, 1990) in professional practice, which describes how discursive practice can function as daily struggles to resist the limitations institutions and structures of power. As de Certeau (1984) argues in his famous “walking the city” metaphor, although “the city” is regulated by the strategies of governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies, “the walkers” move tactically (e.g. taking shortcuts) and can never be fully determined by the planes of organizing bodies. Likewise, some journalists in China are able to improvise and realize their professional dreams based on opportunist calculations (Pan, 2000).

Last but not least, the shifting media landscape in China has generated significant impacts in the communication technology sector, as demonstrated by the amazing growth of the mobile network and the Internet in China. One speculation shared by many researchers (e.g. McCormick & Liu, 2003; Scotton, 2010; Yang, 2009) is that such technological development may affect the administrative control of media outreach or even create an “online public sphere” in China. Such an argument is both inspiring and controversial. The overtly entertainment oriented nature of Chinese Internet today raises serious doubts about this “online public sphere” argument (Scotton, 2010). However, one cannot dismiss the fact that the wide adoption of new media technology by Chinese NGOs has indeed facilitated the development of activism in China (Yang, 2009; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). One must conceptualize online activities in China as an ongoing dialectic of power and resistance situated in China’s complex media environment (Yang, 2009).

### **5.3. Environmental Journalism in China**

So far, this chapter has focused on the changes and reforms of Chinese media system and their general impacts on journalistic practices in China. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the production of environmental news is inevitably influenced by media political economy, media routines, and other factors such as journalist norms and news frames (Cox, 2013). From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, the Chinese media system is part of the social context in which discursive practices such as environmental news stories occur (Fairclough, 1989). Thus the dominant characteristics of Chinese media have significant influence on how news organizations represent and report upon environmental issues.

Historically, environmental news was a peripheral concern within the Chinese media system. Issues such as the over-exploitation of natural resources and industrial pollution were simply neglected or regarded as the “price of prosperity” (Shapiro, 2001). Sometimes, the Chinese government may have censored environmental news as it was regarded as a “threat to social stability” or a “humiliation of national face”. News stories regarding the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, for instance, were initially censored after its occurrence<sup>22</sup> (Palmer, 2012). In recent years, however, environmental news in China has experienced dramatic growth due to the increasing visibility of environmental issues. The current characteristics of Chinese media impose the following factors upon its environmental journalism:

#### **5.3.1. National face and environmental politics**

Although China is increasingly acquiring a reputation for the massive development of renewable energy sources, the country is also still widely criticized (especially by developed countries) for its massive CO<sub>2</sub> emission. As a result, a unique

<sup>22</sup> The 1976 Tangshan earthquake, with 7.8 magnitudes, is one of the worst earthquakes in Chinese history. It killed approximately 655,000 according to China’s official statement, but this figure is widely regarded as an understatement. Besides being considered as a “national humiliation”, the censorship of this natural disaster results from its sensitive occurring time (1976) when China was near the end of Cultural Revolution and both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong passed away (In traditional Chinese thought, natural disasters are seen as precursors of dynastic changes) (Palmer, 2012).

form of “climate skepticism” is growing in China. This skepticism does not deny the validity of climate science; instead, it focuses on the validity of the global carbon reduction schemes and views them as a new form of “carbon colonialism” (Gou, 2010). Controversies surrounding global carbon reduction can be attributed to many factors; however, in the case of China, strong sentiments of patriotic nationalism are clearly shaping the country’s approach to international climate negotiations. Indeed, when Xie Zhenhua<sup>23</sup> threw back the EU’s criticism of China with the words “what entitles you to lecture me here”, he expressed the common outrage and frustration shared by both the Chinese government and the Chinese public (Zhang & Barr, 2013). Such a sentiment clearly targets the hypocrisy of the West and the injustice in many global carbon-reduction proposals, but they are also clearly connected with China’s frustration with its status in global (environmental) politics and the country’s bitter memory of its diplomatic failures before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. As such, when Chinese media run stories on global environmental politics, nationalist expressions can be frequently observed.

### **5.3.2. The market logic and the party logic**

Environmental issues, as high-profile events in recent years, are undoubtedly newsworthy for Chinese media and news stories on these events can attract considerable amount of viewership/readership. *Southern Weekend*, for instance, ran a series of special reports on Particulate Matter 2.5 (PM 2.5) in late 2011<sup>24</sup>, which not only resulted in a successful environmental campaign but also an increased readership for *Southern Weekend* among the Chinese public (Zhang & Barr, 2013). In other words, environmental journalism can offer Chinese journalists great opportunities to conduct serious journalism within the boundaries established by market logic. Party logic, in contrast, can be a double-edged sword for environmental journalism in China. On the

<sup>23</sup> Xie was the head of the Chinese delegation to the 2011 United Nations Climate Change Conference.

<sup>24</sup> Particulate Matter is tiny pieces of solid or liquid matter associated with the Earth's atmosphere. PM 2.5 refers to fine particles with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less, which has serious negative effects on human’s respiratory system. In recent years, PM2.5 has become a central topic in discussions of China’s air pollution. The details of the *Southern Weekend* case will be discussed in Chapter Six.

one hand, the contentious nature of many environmental issues makes them politically sensitive and consequently, reporting these events can directly conflict with the will of local officials. For example, the 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest, due to its sensitive nature at the time, was heavily censored across various Chinese media platforms (the case will be discussed in details in Chapter Six). On the other hand, the party logic can also promote increased attention to certain environmental issues when they are in line with party interests. For instance, when a severe earthquake hit Sichuan province in 2008, the event became an opportunity for the convergence of serious journalism with the party's interest in showing its leadership; as a result, Chinese journalists demonstrated unprecedented professionalism in covering various aspects of this disasters whereas the Chinese government showed rare openness (compared with its reluctance after the Tangshan earthquake) for earthquake-related issues (Hachten & Scotton, 2010).

## **5.4. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has reviewed the general characteristics of Chinese media system and discussed their potential impacts on environmental journalism in China. Overall, the current media system in China is marked by the coexistence of the market logic and the party logic, which contributes the many contradictions and ambiguities observed in the system. Furthermore, patriotic nationalism has become a common frame adopted by Chinese media discourse, especially in the realm of China's international affairs. As such, China's environmental journalism is embedded in a paradoxical situation that features constant political, economic, ideological, and discursive struggles. In the final chapter, we will review environmental discourse in China through two case studies: Beijing's air pollution and the 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest.

## **Chapter 6. The Good, the Bad, and the Neglected: Mapping Environmental Discourse in China**

As suggested in Chapter Four, China's spectacular economic growth over the past three decades has produced serious environmental impacts and dramatically depleted the country's natural resources. Consequently, there has been a significant rise of media coverage regarding China's environmental challenges both domestically and internationally (Tong, 2014; Wu, 2009; Zhang & Barr, 2013). To date, media coverage of China's environmental issues, despite their significance and potential implications for the world, has received comparatively little attention within the field of environmental communication. Moreover, much of the work that has appeared (e.g. Tong, 2014; Wu 2009) adopts a strong and often one-dimensional 'liberal' perspective on environmental issues: that is, it uses environmental crises as an opportunity to attack existing political institutions and the state in China. However, media coverage of China's environmental challenges is diverse and often contradictory, offering different interpretations and perspectives with respect to these challenges. China, for example, has received both accolades and condemnation from Western media for its role in global climate change (Zhang & Barr, 2013). On the one hand, the Chinese state's executive force in the implementation of environmental policies and its extensive commitments to renewable energy innovation have impressed many Western commentators. China is the first among the major industrial countries to expressly commit to pursuing a vision of "ecological civilization" (Wang, 2012). On the other hand, as the world's largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter, China's unwillingness to take more responsibility in global CO<sub>2</sub> reduction has been strongly criticized by other industrial countries, especially the United States, which frequently uses China as an excuse for its own inaction on many environmental issues, including climate change (Wu, 2009). According to Dryzek (2013), "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 context, the proliferation of media coverage on China's environmental issues is symptomatic of a complex discursive

struggle, with competing representations, worldviews, and systems of meaning battling it out in the public sphere.

This chapter will explore media coverage of China's environmental challenges through a critical discourse analysis of two recent high-profile environmental incidents in China: the growth of air pollution and, in particular, the so-called "Beijing smog", and a 2012 protest against a Para-xylene (PX) chemical plant in Ningbo. This chapter is structured as follows. First, methodological considerations for the two case studies will be discussed. Then, the media coverage of both cases will be subjected to a critical discourse analysis. Finally, the chapter will end by reviewing the key issues that dominate discursive struggles in China's environmental politics.

## **6.1. A Discourse Approach to Environmental News**

Discourse can be defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories, through which social and physical phenomena achieve their meanings (Hajer, 2005; Dryzek 2013). From a social constructivist perspective, discourses are produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of social practices and thus they are always bound up with politics and power; discourses themselves can also embody power by conditioning the perceptions and values of those who are subject to them and, in this regard, political and social struggles are often presented as conflicts in the discursive realm (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Following Hajer (2005, p. 302), I adopt a conception of "social practice" as the "embedded routines and mutually understood rules and norms that provide coherence to social life" (Hajer, 2005, p. 302). It derives from the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language that linguistic utterances should be understood within the social practices in which they are uttered (Wittgenstein, 1967).

The struggles and conflicts between different discourses can substantially influence the direction of environmental politics. Consider, for example, the acid rain controversy in Northern Europe during the 1990s (Hajer, 1995, 2005): in this case, large numbers of dead trees were, of course, not a social construct, but the meaning and affect through which people made sense of those trees was socially defined. Some saw them as the result of "natural stress" whereas others started to understand them as

victims of air pollution. According to Hajer's analysis, the development of the discourse of "ecological modernization" generated significant political and social impacts in Northern Europe, which, ultimately, pushed Northern European countries into collaborating on the regional acid rain problem. In short, a discourse approach to environmental politics focuses on how environmental issues are defined (e.g. as problems to be solved, as 'natural' or 'inevitable', etc.) and how these definitions evolve within particular constellations of social and political forces, and how those forces can be unified and directed through the formation of discursive coalitions. Hence, mapping environmental discourse 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 for discursive (and political) coalitions that may address these challenges in particular ways.

As reviewed in Chapter Five, media discourse in China is bound up with China's social, political, and cultural struggles as well as its unique media system. Issues such as neoliberalization, popular nationalism, state censorship, and commercialization constantly shape the contour of journalistic practice in contemporary China. These complex factors have substantial influence on media coverage of environmental issues in contemporary China. While China has begun to take environmental issues seriously, the application of its environmental policies has frequently been blocked by the state's semi-authoritarian governance practices, a polarized social class structure, and other economic, social, and political factors.

The two case studies reported here are based upon the collection and analysis of news reports published by English-language news media in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the United States. The focus on English-language news media is due to two considerations. First, the focus on news written in English ensures that items published in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and the United States are comparable since linguistic features are crucial for the validity of critical discourse analysis. Second, although the proliferation of 24/7 transnational satellite news and the explosion of online media have considerably altered our media landscape, traditional news reports published by news agencies and newspapers continue to hold a dominant position in our media system and serve as a crucial information source for the public (Zhao, 2014). There are two major reasons behind the inclusion of news reports published in Hong Kong and the United

States. First, this arrangement was meant to provide comparative perspectives for news reports published in Mainland China since some aspects of the two cases may be missing in Mainland China's official news discourse. Second, the ideological differences between news reports published in Mainland China and those published in Hong Kong and the United States may lead to interesting discursive contrasts between the two groups, which can offer insights regarding the political implications of the studied cases.

The case studies are not meant to offer a comprehensive survey of environmental discourse about China; rather, they aim to make inferences about how China's environmental challenges are mediated through news discourse. Using the search terms "Beijing smog" and "Ningbo protest", news report samples were drawn from the LexisNexis database. News items from four sources were collected for the data analysis: the Xinhua News Agency (XNA), *China Daily* (CD), *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), and the Associated Press (AP). These news sources were chosen since they represent the crucial news agencies shaping media discourse on China. Both the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* are expressive of the Chinese government's official voice and, consequently, play determinative roles in agenda-setting and news frame construction in the media landscape of Mainland China. The Xinhua News Agency is China's official press agency and its biggest center for the collection and distribution of news information. *China Daily* is the most circulated English-language newspaper in China and it plays a key role in cultivating a national image for China and articulating the Chinese government's politics and concerns to the English-speaking community both domestically and abroad. By comparison, the news reports published by *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press represent more liberal and critical perspectives on Chinese domestic affairs. *South China Morning Post* 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, the Associated Press provides news stories for around 1,400 U.S. daily newspapers and thousands of televisions and radio broadcasts, which makes it one of the most important news agencies in the world.

The time frame of data collection was set between January 1st and January 31st, 2013 for the Beijing smog case, when the air quality index of Beijing severely worsened and, for the first time, started to draw extensive domestic and international media attention. For the Ningbo protest case, items published between October 15th and

November 15th, 2012 were gathered: this corresponds to a period of intense street protests which occurred during the last week of October 2012, during the climax of the conflict. A total of 76 news reports were collected for the Beijing smog case and 16 items were gathered for the Ningbo protest case (Table 3). Appendix A provides a complete list of the analyzed news titles.

**Table 3: The Collected News Reports for the Case Studies**

	The Beijing Smog	The Ningbo Protest
<i>The Xinhua News Agency</i>	15	2
<i>China Daily</i>	35	3
<i>South China Morning Post</i>	20	6
<i>The Associated Press</i>	6	5
Total	76	16

Given the modest size of the data sample, qualitative discourse analysis is the most suitable methodology. The two case studies adopted Maarten Hajer's "argumentative discourse analysis" (ADA) approach to analyze the selected news texts (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 2005; Smart, 2013). Hajer's approach is based on a neo-Foucaultian conceptualization of discourse, investigating broad discursive patterns across multiple texts and how these patterns both shape and are shaped by groups of social actors. There are four important concepts in ADA: discourse, metaphor, storyline, and discourse coalition. The concept of "discourse", as previously discussed, refers to a shared way of apprehending the world but also as a site of ideological struggle. The essence of metaphor is "understanding and experiencing one kind of things in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; as cited in Hajer, 2005, p.301). As recent discoveries in cognitive linguistics suggest, we rely heavily upon metaphors to define things and perform cognitive tasks. For instance, the term "acid rain" itself is a metaphor since meteorologically it should be called "acid precipitation". By reducing a scientific phenomenon "acid precipitation" into a common metaphor "acid rain", discussions on this environmental issue have more appeal to policy makers and the general public (Hajer, 2005). Building upon various conceptualizations, people often convey their understanding of "facts" into narratives, which then form various storylines describing the same phenomenon. The concept of "story line" in ADA shares many similarities with the concept of "framing" as discussed in Chapter Three. Conflicting story lines on contemporary environmental issues can be regarded as conflicting frames of environmental discourse since these story lines offer "organizing principles that are

socially shared (by the public) and persistent over time, which meaningfully structure the social world through symbolic devices” (Entman, 2010; Pan & Kosicki, 2005; Reese, 2007). Finally, people subscribing to similar story lines may join together into “discourse coalitions”, in which social actors (re)produce and transform particular discourses (Hajer, 1995). In sum, the general focus of ADA is how various “story lines” are discursively constructed via various symbolic devices. Based on ADA’s analytical framework, the collected news reports were analyzed according to the following steps:

1. Contextual information and basic facts: this step is a general survey of the collected news reports, which provides an initial chronology and preliminary reading of the target news events. It also examines the prominent “background stories” of the target news events by scrutinizing relevant discussions in the collected news reports. As discussed in Chapter Three, context is crucial for critical interpretations of discursive practices.

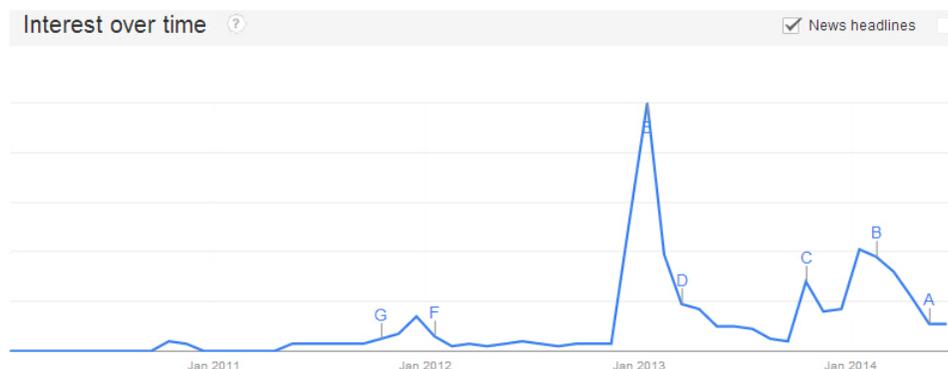
2. Discourse and frame analyses: this step investigates how the target news events are discursively constructed by the collected reports. As discussed in Chapter Three, the process of framing involves four major steps: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. As such, this step focuses on four aspects regarding the discursive constructions of the target news events: (1) the definition(s) of specific social and political issues during the events, (2) the principle actors depicted in these issues, (3) the prominent metaphors and frames used in the collected news reports, and (4) the proposed solutions of the environmental challenges.

3. Assessments and Discussions: On the basis of the preceding steps, this step summarizes the key findings and offers a comprehensive assessment of the discursive practice(s).

## 6.2. Clean Air with Chinese Characteristics: The Smog Hazard in Beijing

During January 2013, heavy smog repetitively enveloped Beijing, causing highway closures, flight delays, and increasing respiratory diseases among Beijing residents. Since then, Beijing’s air pollution has become an important issue in China’s news coverage. Although Beijing had experienced problems with air pollution before this incident – the city had experienced severe dust storms frequently in previous years – the heavy smog was unprecedented in its severity and duration. Indeed, the phenomenon quickly became symbolic of China’s environmental degradation. Despite its long debate with the U.S. Embassy about air quality in Beijing, the Chinese government was finally forced to admit severe air pollution in the city and promised to take “necessary measures” to cope with the problem.

The so-called “Beijing smog” received extensive news coverage across the world. One search (in August 2014) using “Beijing smog” in Google News generated more than 10,000 results. As shown in Figure 4, news reports on the issue initially peaked in January 2013 and the issue subsequently re-emerged in January 2014. Given the large volume of news coverage, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive portrait of media discourse on the smog hazard. Instead, the current analysis focused upon the news reports provided by the Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, *South China Morning Post*, and the Associated Press.



**Figure 3: The number of news headlines worldwide on Beijing’s smog (Source: Google Trend)**

### 6.2.1. Reporting the smog: Contextual information and basic facts

Even before the January 2013 Beijing smog, air pollution had been a longstanding issue of concern in China. China's particulate matter (PM) pollution level was already 10-16 times higher than the World Health Organization's (WHO) standard by the 1980s, (World Bank, 2007). Terms such as "acid rain" and "atmospheric suspended matter" appeared frequently in news reports, but they rarely attracted widespread or sustained public attention. As Zhang and Barr (2013) explain, the Chinese public was broadly aware of the country's deteriorating environment, but most accepted that fact as the necessary price to pay for modernity.

However, China's air pollution problem has gradually become a more serious concern since 2008 in the country's public discourse. In particular, the levels of Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5 in China's major cities have frequently appeared in the headlines of China's various media platforms. Although the public's concern about this issue can be connected to many factors, three public incidents were particularly influential in raising the profile of air pollution before it finally exploded into the public sphere as the "Beijing smog" in January 2013. The first event was the so-called "Blue Sky" project conducted in Beijing during the 2008 Summer Olympics. By taking radical measures such as forcing private cars off the road on alternative days, relocating Beijing factories to other cities, and temporarily shutting down industries in nearby regions, the city temporarily but significantly reduced its air pollution, providing an unforgettable moment for Beijing residents. As *China Daily* wrote during the 2013 smog hazard:

#### *Example 1*

We do have some experience of air pollution control, since it has lasted for many years, although not as serious as it is today. For example, the adoption of some expedient measures, such as the temporary closure and relocation of factories, could offer some relief, as shown in the air-cleaning campaign ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. [...]

(Clear the Smog, CD, January 31, 2013)

The second event was the politicization of the PM 2.5 designation, which emerged as a consequence of a conflict between the Beijing municipal government and the local U.S. embassy. When China's Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP)

revised the country's air quality index in 2010, PM 2.5 metrics were not included. The explanation provided at that time was that the measurement of PM 2.5 levels would have been premature for "Chinese particularities". Unsurprisingly, most Chinese saw this as a weak and dubious excuse. Meanwhile, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing has monitored local air quality for several years and its air quality index has been constantly used to critique and even ridicule the "official data" published by the Chinese government. According to *Time* magazine, the Chinese government first complained about the embassy's action in 2009, warning that publishing this information would cause confusion amongst the Chinese public and lead to negative social consequences (Ramzy, 2012). The politicization of PM 2.5 reached its height on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 when Xiao-Qing Wu, the vice minister of MEP, publicly claimed that the air quality monitoring action by the U.S. embassy in Beijing was an "infringement of China's national sovereignty". As we shall see, this strong nationalist narrative became quite ironic later during the smog hazard, creating difficulties for a Chinese government intent on justifying its leadership on the smog issue.

The third event or process was a nation-wide grassroots movement for establishing an air monitoring and data-sharing system beginning in 2011. Known as "I monitor the air for my country", this public campaign aimed to push the government to implement better air quality controls through bottom-up, grassroots pressure. The name of the movement was taken from the title of a special report published by *Southern Weekend*, a very popular liberal newspaper in China. *Southern Weekend* was crucial for the publicity of the movement. The title "I monitor the air for my country" appropriated the style of patriotic slogans from Mao's era, capturing a sense of "self-redemptive patriotism" that legitimized the movement, both to the authorities as well as to the general public (Zhang & Barr, 2013). The report was also published with a cartoon, imitating the style of revolutionary propaganda posters (Figure 3). In many respects, the movement represented a protest against the sloppiness of China's environmental institutions. Chinese ENGOs played a key role in the organization of the movement. For instance, Green Beagle, a Beijing-based ENGO, organized many public events, including promoting a proposal to create an aggregate record of Beijing's air quality by asking individual citizens to trace their nearby PM 2.5 levels (Zhang & Barr, 2013).



**Figure 4: “I monitor my air for my country” (Source: *Southern Weekend*)**

In short, air quality in Beijing had long been the subject of public discussion before 2013. To some extent, the massive breakout of smog hazard in 2013 served as a tipping point of this issue, which then captured the attention of national and international media in an unprecedented fashion. Although the dramatic increase of visibility can be attributed to the seriousness of the situation, the legacy of the Blue Sky project, the controversy surrounding the U.S. embassy in Beijing, and the public mobilization efforts of ENGOs also played key roles in defining the “rhetorical tropes” of the smog. The above factors, along with Chinese public’s increasing awareness of the country’s degrading environment, explain why the smog hazard has become an iconic event for environmentalism in China.

A general survey of the collected news reports identified the following basic facts regarding the smog hazard: this hazard was regarded as one of China’s worst environmental incidents in recent years since the daily pollution readings in Beijing reached the worst level multiple times during January 2013. It caused serious damage to the health and daily lives of Beijing residents: due to the heavy smog, the number of patients with respiratory diseases significantly increased and both air transportation and ground transportation were interrupted several times. Confronting the smog, the Beijing government committed to curb the environmental challenges by taking dramatic actions. Some measures were implemented, including shutting down factories in nearby regions, reducing traffic size, and suspending construction sites, but they only achieved limited success. Instead, the general consensus suggested by the media coverage was that more substantial changes were necessary to tackle Beijing’s air pollution issue in a serious and long-term fashion.

## 6.2.2. Analyzing the smog: Discourses, frames, and story lines

The core story line of the smog hazard was that it posed a significant challenge to Beijing's developmental path since the 2008 Summer Olympics. The smog was framed as an alarming signal of China's deteriorating environment and as a result, the Chinese government was urged to take action with the collaboration of other social sectors. The major solutions proposed by the government was the inclusion of more "sustainable thoughts" into China's economy growth, such as incorporating more scientific assessments in urban planning, improving government transparency in environment policy-making, and promoting "sustainable life styles" among citizens. To a large extent, discourses on the smog hazard reflected the "problem-solving frame" discussed in Chapter Three, which acknowledged the existing environmental challenge (i.e. air pollution in Beijing), but treated it as a solvable problem within the current political economy structure of industrial society. To be more specific, the solutions discussed in the news reports rested on the administrative rationalism within the problem-solving frame since these solutions tended to be emblematic of an administrative approach to risk management, emphasizing the importance of bureaucratic hierarchy in tackling the smog hazard. Digging a little deeper, this story line was constructed by the following elements.

First, the definition of the smog experienced a noticeable shift along with its progress or development. The first appearance of the smog in the collected news reports was on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013, at which time it was reported as news about the weather:

### *Example 2*

Heavy fog enveloped a large swathe of east and central China Saturday, causing highway closures and flight delays in several provinces. Beijing was shrouded in dense smog for a second straight day Saturday. The smoggy weather will not clear up until Monday, the city's environment monitoring center said. Beijing's air is heavily polluted. Readings for PM2.5, or airborne particles with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less -- small enough to deeply penetrate the lungs -- were as high as 456 on Saturday. The elderly, children and those suffering from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases are advised to stay indoors to reduce exposure to polluted air. Meanwhile, heavy fog has blanketed several regions in east and central China, including Hebei, Tianjin, Shandong, Henan, Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi and Hubei provinces. In Shandong, more than 20 highways were closed, as the fog reduced visibility in some areas to less

than 50 meters, the provincial meteorological center said. A total of 63 flights in and out of Shandong's eastern coastal city of Qingdao had been canceled or delayed by 2 p.m. Saturday, affecting about 5,000 passengers, according to airport administration authorities in Qingdao. In Jiangxi, visibility in eight cities was reduced less than 500 meters. The fog forced five highways to close and delayed dozens of flights at an airport in the provincial capital of Nanchang on Saturday morning, according to local meteorological authorities.

(Fog Shrouds East, Central China; Disrupts Traffic, XNA, January 12, 2013)

What was interesting in this example was that it did not offer any causal explanation for the smog. Although the report specifically described the smog's severity and negative impacts, it also normalized it, stating that "heavy fog have blanketed several regions in east and central China", which resembled news coverage of other bad weather events such as snowstorms or cold air masses in winter. Adopting a well-established narrative structure for meteorology news, the report also implied that the smog would soon dissipate, just like other bad weather *caused by non-human factors*. Such normalization was understandable since winter in east and central China tends to be dry and cold, often accompanied by expected weather changes. As such, when authorities in Beijing were questioned about the city's alarming air conditions on January 12th, they blamed foggy conditions and a lack of wind for the high concentration of air pollutants ("Air Pollution in Beijing Reaches Hazardous Levels", AP, January 12, 2013). Hence, the smog was defined as a temporary and minor issue at its initial stage.

However, as the smog continued to linger, editorial concern about the causes of the smog started to appear in the collected reports, especially those published by Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily*. These pieces clearly defined the smog as an "environmental incident" with broad and deep social impacts, signifying key contradictions in China's developmental path. In this respect, the state media's "openness" regarding this domestic affair was somewhat unusual. It may be that the self-evident nature of the problem – which was experienced on a mass scale by all Beijing residents – made it impossible to control and suppress critical media coverage. On January 15, for example, the Xinhua News Agency published two commentaries describing the major causes of the smog as industrial emissions, vehicle exhausts and dust from construction sites.

### Example 3

[...] A country with a brown sky and hazardous air is obviously not beautiful. Experts believe that in addition to unfavorable weather conditions, the roots of the smog are industrial emissions, vehicle exhausts and dust from construction sites. In 2011, China announced that it has met its major air and water pollution control targets for the country's 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) and set even more ambitious reduction goals for the following five years. However, the prolonged smog these past days indicates that as China's industrialization and urbanization is stepping forward, the environmental situation facing the country will be increasingly challenging and counter-pollution control work will be arduous and require more vigorous, effective and scientific measures. There is no reason to be too optimistic. [...]

(China Voice: Brown Skies Obscure “Beautiful China” Ambitions, XNA, January 15, 2013)

### Example 4

[...] The government can easily be at fault for slack supervision over industrial pollution, but people have to look at their own contributions to the aggregation of PM2.5, a sensitive science jargon that touched Chinese nerves after they came to know the particle's threat to their health more than a year ago. The haze has prompted Chinese people to think over a question: What do we want, breathtaking growth or taking a breath amid choking air? Years of extensive economic growth, driven by the desire of a once impoverished people to become better off, has led to surging levels of carbon dioxide emissions and random discharge of hazardous chemicals by industrial manufacturers. Voices that call for environmental improvements are loud, but the government is caught in the dilemma between sustaining its people's twin dreams of "living better" and "living green." Shutting down factories risks an increase in unemployment. Levying higher taxes on automobiles and limiting the number of vehicle plates would discourage consumption, a major engine for economic growth.

(China Voice: Green Storm Invites Public Participation, XNA, January 15, 2013)

The above excerpts emphasized the connection between the smog and China's rapid industrialization and urbanization. Such narrative positioned the smog as an “inconvenient truth”, reminding *the Chinese people* (not only the government) about increasing environmental challenges. Significantly, the narrative described *both Chinese government and Chinese people* as contributors to the aggregation of PM2.5 and as a

result, the Chinese government was not positioned as fully or solely responsible for the pollution. Given the blurred party/state boundary in China, this diffusion of responsibility to the Chinese people can be interpreted as an attempt to ameliorate more direct criticism of the Party. In addition, broadly generalized accounts of the smog's causes further limited the possibility of more focused criticism of particular government institutions and priorities given that the whole society was assumed to be responsible for the smog.

The apparent trade-off between “living better” and “living green” suggested in Example 4 was also problematic as it was predicated upon the assumption that “economic growth would inevitably generate environmental problems”. This assumption echoed the widely held “common sense” in China that the country’s deteriorating environment is the necessary price for modernization, an idea which stands in direct contrast to the goal of sustainable development (Zhang & Barr, 2013). As Example 4 proposed, measures such as shutting down factories and limiting the number of vehicles needed to be cautiously evaluated since such actions would likely discourage consumption and, therefore, slow economic growth. The essential logic here is that economic growth in China provides people with better lives, which fits with the role that economic growth has recently played in legitimating the CCP’s ongoing governance of China.

As the negative impacts of the smog prevailed, though, the news reports began to focus more upon various social actors associated with the smog, as well as to discuss possible solutions to the problem. The collected reports primarily represented four major social actors in Beijing when depicting the smog’s “respondents” and “victims”: the government, the residents, corporations, and ENGOs. Most news items portrayed the Beijing government as an “active respondent” to the challenges created by the smog. Both the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily*, for instance, provided extensive coverage to the Beijing government’s anti-smog measures (after January 12, 2013), such as a new willingness to regularly publish air condition indexes, actively releasing health alerts, and shutting down highly polluting factories and industries in Beijing. Consider the following example:

*Example 5*

Beijing closed down as many as 150 highly polluting chemical engineering and cement factories. Most of the closures were temporary, but a few were permanent. Furthermore, thermoelectric-power generating companies were ordered to reduce emissions of pollutants by 30 percent through the use of low-sulphur coals and the installation of desulfurization units.

(Blue-sky Thinking may Need New Olympian Vision, CD, January 24, 2013)

As noted earlier, a crucial task faced by the Chinese government was to defend and assert its environment credentials during the smog hazard, especially after the public humiliation imposed by its conflicts with the U.S. embassy in Beijing. The extensive coverage of the Beijing government's various anti-smog measures highlighted the Chinese government's active and transparent stance, which helped the government regain the public's confidence with respect to its capacity to protect the environment. Both the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily*, in other words, followed the party logic, using the smog as an opportunity to re-establish the government's authority and credibility in domestic environmental issues. However, this did not mean that the Chinese government ever assumed full responsibility for the smog: in the collected reports, there was never any public apology on the part of government.

Despite their broadly critical perspective of the Chinese government's initial opacity about the smog, both *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press made neutral or even positive comments about the Chinese government's improved transparency as the smog prevailed. Notwithstanding the similarity between domestic and oversea media, one may suspect the two sides had quite different motives. Compared with China's state media, *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press saw the smog as an opportunity to push the Chinese government toward reforms in its environment policies.

#### *Example 6*

Hazardous smog - that has for days blanketed north, central and east China - makes plain the scale of the environmental challenge Xi Jinping's incoming government faces. [...] There could be no better way for a new administration to show it means business than by bringing back blue skies and breathable air. Those should be basic rights for all people, no matter where they live. Unfortunately, cities struggle to attain them,

especially those in fast-developing countries like China. Xi's pledge of economic sustainability offers hope. The nation has prospered under a growth-at-all-costs model, but the environment has suffered enormously as a result. Air pollution in Beijing that is the worst in at least a decade has to provide an impetus for tough action. [...] Vital steps are already under way. There is a huge investment in switching to cleaner fuels; efforts are being made to limit purchases of new cars; and, since the start of the year, better information on air pollution has been made available. Winds later this week are predicted to start blowing the smog away. But nature alone will not make the air in China's cities safer. That will require a new kind of thinking, a sustainable model of development and great resolve.

(Clean Air should be a Basic Right. SCMP, January 15. 2013)

Blue skies and breathable air are defined as basic rights for all people. Given how the Chinese government censors the term “human right”, it is impossible for such phrases to appear in China’s state media. However, by explicitly connecting the incoming government and the environmental challenges of the smog, *South China Morning Post* was able to emphasize the necessity of more policy reforms in China. Compared with China’s state media, such a narrative strategy was more critical and confrontational.

The residents in Beijing also received extensive coverage in the collected reports, but almost always only as passive victims with limited agency to address the problem. Many stories featured interviews with Beijing residents, in which the residents expressed their frustration and worries as the smog lingered.

#### *Example 7*

Wang Hai-jun, a sanitation worker in Chao-yang district, said he wears a mask provided by his company every day. The company gives sanitation workers two masks a month and has emphasized the importance of wearing them when the sky is gray, he said. “Some of my colleagues don't wear the mask because it's not easy to breath through them, but I know how much pollution will get in my lungs without it,” Wang said.

(“Pollution Masks Given to Outdoor Workers”, CD, January 14, 2013)

#### *Example 8*

Joshua Dyer, a translator from the United States, recalled how different Beijing's air was when he arrived in 2008, when huge sums were being invested to improve the environment for the Olympics. "It was surprisingly good. Many blue skies,' he said. 'But what happened over the weekend was really shocking." Dyer uses an air filter at home and puts on a mask when pollution readings are high. 'The air pollution is one reason I know I can't stay much longer here. I feel the bad air affects me psychologically as well. I feel sluggish on heavily polluted days."

(Choking Pollution Drives Expats out of the Capital, SCMP, January 17, 2013)

Here, the collected reports speak to the hardships experienced by all Beijing residents, depicting the experiences of people from a variety of social, cultural and economic backgrounds (e.g. white-collar workers, foreign expats, and traffic police). To some extent, such narratives cultivated a sense that "we are all in this together". This construction of collective victimhood, however, is problematic from an environmental justice perspective as it pre-empted discussions about the unfair distribution of environmental damage across society. While the hardship experienced by Joshua may deserve attention and support, it is simply incomparable to the suffering experienced by migrant outdoor workers in Beijing, who lack the resources or support to protect themselves from the impacts of air pollution. However, news coverage largely neglected these migrant workers' experiences.

For the most part, Beijing residents were also represented as "passive victims" with limited agency to fight the smog. When Beijing residents were quoted, their opinions on the smog's causes and potential solutions were never portrayed. Instead, discussions of causes were restricted to government officials, intellectuals, and ENGO leaders. As such, the discussion of solutions was largely represented as the responsibility (and privilege) of elites, especially those from the government. One commentary from the Xinhua News Agency offered the following opinion on "public participation":

#### *Example 9*

[...] It may be too unrealistic to rely on individuals' conscience for environmental improvement. Luckily, the government is mapping a blueprint to build a "beautiful China" by seeking a sustainable mode of development. Everyone has the right to criticize the government for

environmental concerns, but they have to take their own actions if they want change.

(China Voice: Green Storm Invites Public Participation, XNA, January 15, 2013)

Consider the ambivalent attitude toward public participation here: reliance upon the conscience of individuals for environmental improvement is too unrealistic and, instead, the only possible path is to support the government in building a “beautiful China”. Supporting government is the only valid form of public participation, a stance that further legitimated the government’s authority in environmental issues.

In terms of corporations and ENGOS in Beijing, news coverage largely portrayed them as “compliant followers” of the government. According to the news, the major activities of the non-government sector during the smog were responding to the government’s orders (e.g. some factories were voluntarily closed) and assisting its policies (e.g. NGOs distributed protective masks among out-door workers). The following is a typical example of reports on ENGOS during the smog:

*Example 10*

As the stench of coal and automobile exhaust hangs in the air, NGOs are preparing to hand out masks to people who work outside, including street cleaners, traffic wardens and doormen, in cities including Beijing and Tianjin and in Hunan province. “People working outdoors are vulnerable when they are exposed to pollution, which has soared past dangerous level, with no protective measures,” said Feng Yong-Feng, an organizer of Green Beagle, an environmental protection NGO in the capital. “It’s urgent that people who work in the heavy smog are well protected, because the air quality has been worsening since Friday.” Environmental protection NGO Greenpeace has about 300 masks and is recruiting volunteers to help deliver them to people exposed to pollution.”

(Pollution Masks Given to Outdoor Workers, CD, January 14, 2013)

The volunteer activity led by Green Beagle constructs an image of solidarity as well as an absence of confrontation. Given the strict regulations on the NGO sector in China this is not surprising. However, the image of solidarity had the effect of limiting more comprehensive discussion about the causes of the smog, and effectively neutered ENGOS in terms of providing a critical perspective on Beijing’s developmental path.

By mid-January 2013, there was no sign that the smog issue would disappear in the short term. Consequently, the news coverage started to address potential solutions for the smog and, more broadly, speak about China's bigger environmental challenges. One interesting media frame emerging from these discussions was that of the smog as a "common enemy" or "negative other". On January 16, 2013, the Premier of China, Li Ke-Qiang<sup>25</sup>, made the following promise:

*Example 11*

Vice-premier calls for immediate action as capital can learn from experience of other major cities that tackled pollution. "China will **strengthen** the enforcement of environmental laws, and take other measures to **tackle** air pollution, Vice-Premier Li Keqiang **pledged** on Tuesday. "We published accurate PM2.5 data. It took a long time for this problem to accumulate, and it will take a long time to solve it," he said. 'But **we must act!** We have to strengthen the enforcement of environmental laws and other regulations and also **remind the public to protect themselves.**"

(Li Pledges Measures in Fight for Clean Air, CD, January 16, 2013)

One of the most interesting qualities here is the use of war metaphors. The narrative style of Li's pledge resembles war propaganda insofar as it emphasizes the necessity of taking actions by constructing a self/other binary (Hall, 2001). The militarization of discourse, as a socialist legacy of Mao's era, has been widely employed in China's news coverage of public issues, such as SARS and the Wenchuan Earthquake. As Pennycook (1998) suggests, the binary logic imposed by the "military" metaphor is problematic since it glorifies any group or role identified as "self", while stigmatizing roles or groups identified as "other". In the current case, positing the smog hazard as a negative problem that we can all fight together deflected attention away from industry, in particular, as a major cause of the smog. Implicitly, such narrative further legitimated a hierarchical perspective that rationalizes human domination over nature (e.g. China's rapid industrialization via exploiting natural resources).

<sup>25</sup> Li was Vice Premier of China when the smog broke out in January 2013.

In regard to specific policy proposals, the majority of solutions proposed strengthening government regulations and enhancing public awareness. One article titled “Lesson of London must be Learnt” made the following comment:

*Example 12*

[...] China has invested heavily in reducing polluting emissions in recent years. [...] However, the prolonged smog these past days indicates that as China's industrialization and urbanization is moving ahead, the environmental situation facing the country will be increasingly challenging and counter-pollution control work will be arduous and require more vigorous, effective and scientific measures. [...] The weekend smog in Beijing is reminiscent of the Great Smog of London in 1952, which was believed to have resulted in the premature deaths of at least 4,000 people, a heavy cost for prosperity in the industrialization progress. But London is no longer the "city of fog," thanks to enhanced governmental regulations and public awareness. China should learn from its experiences, but avoid duplicating its failure.

(Lesson of London must be Learnt, CD, January 16, 2013)

As this excerpt shows, the major solutions offered by the Chinese government followed the administrative approach to environmental problems, primarily relying upon top-down regulations and scientific measures to address industrial pollution (Dryzek, 2013). In addition to the lack of specific measures, the biggest problem here was the continuing emphasis upon ensuring economic growth as a political and economic priority. Proposing London as the ideal model for China’s future was also problematic since the developmental path of London is not a model of ecological modernization at all. Admittedly, environmental policies and public campaigns have been significant for London’s anti-pollution achievements. But one of the fundamental reasons why London (and other major cities in the Global North) now enjoys “blue skies” is because globalization has shifted most of the heavy-polluting industries from developed countries to developing countries. And given the mounting environmental pressures caused by global climate change, the capitalist way of environmental management is simply unrealistic for today’s China.

Overall, the analyzed reports have collectively constructed the following story line regarding the Beijing smog: (1) the smog hazard, as an alarming signal of China’s deteriorating environment, has caused serious damage to Beijing and its residents; (2)

confronting this challenge, the Chinese government, with the collaboration of the non-governmental sector, has taken a variety of counter-measures to address the problem; and (3) the smog hazard would eventually be solved through enhancing governmental regulations and public awareness. As such, the news coverage of the Beijing smog essentially reflects the “problem-solving” frame discussed in Chapter Three, which recognizes the existing environmental problems (i.e. air pollution in Beijing), but treats them as solvable problems within the current political economy structure of industrial society (Dryzek, 2013). As a result, the collected reports have not addressed possible solutions that require radical transformations, such as slowing down economic growth or urbanization process. In other words, the industrialization and modernization logic behind China’s developmental path in the past three decades remains largely untouched.

More importantly, the perspective of environmental justice has been largely neglected in the collected reports. The benefits and rights of Beijing’s migrant workers, for instance, were rarely addressed in the collected reports, despite the fact that this social group has suffered the most from the smog hazard: many became unemployed due to the emergency closure of construction sites or took health risks by working long days in the smog as casual labor. The construction of collective victimhood has discursively concealed the differences between migrant workers and social elites, which then prevents more radical and grassroots perspectives on the smog hazard.

Last but not least, the extensive focus upon the city of Beijing displaced attention from similar problems occurring in other cities in northern China during the spring of 2013. Remarkably, these other cities were often positioned as themselves responsible for causing the smog hazard in Beijing. The urban-centric perspective failed to offer a comprehensive view of China’s air pollution at the national level.

In conclusion, news coverage of the smog in Beijing, despite its unusual openness, is still restricted by its elitist and imbalanced view, which may discourage future collective solutions of China’s environmental problems. The smog hazard in Beijing not only invites a “green model” to direct China’s future development, but also requires a comprehensive perspective to review China’s current economic structure and its internal environmental injustice.

### **6.3. Ways of Seeing: The Anti-PX Protest in Ningbo**

Between October 23 and 28, 2012, residents of Ningbo (a coastal city close to Shanghai) marched in the streets to protest against the construction of a 55.9 billion RMB (8.9 billion USD) chemical plant in Zhenhai, a rural district only 7.5 kilometers away from Ningbo. The protest was triggered by the health concerns of Ningbo residents since the chemical plant, once completed, would emit Para-xylene<sup>26</sup> (PX), a toxic chemical product. The protest created mounting public pressure on the Ningbo municipal government and received significant and immediate attention on the Chinese Internet. As a result, the Ningbo municipal government announced the “permanent suspension” of the project on October 29.

Similar to other public protests in China, the Ningbo protest received very limited coverage from Chinese news media. In fact, I conducted a pilot study on the Ningbo protest in December 2012 and many of the news reports or comments that had been available at that time were no longer accessible in October 2013. Topics related to the protest were censored in Chinese social media as well. For instance, terms such as “Ningbo”, “Zhenhai”, and “Zhenhai chemical plant” were blocked in SINA Weibo (the most popular microblog platform in China) for approximately one month following the protest. In the current study, a total of 16 news reports were collected from the Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, *South China Morning Post*, and the Associated Press. It is impossible for these reports to provide a complete picture of the protest, but they can still offer valuable insights into the dominant news frames used to represent the incident.

#### **6.3.1. Reporting the protest: Contextual information and basic facts**

Environmental conflicts in China are occasionally presented in radical ways. According to estimates from the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), protests related to environmental problems

<sup>26</sup> Para-xylene is an aromatic hydrocarbon used on a large scale in the manufacture of polyester. Overexposure of this chemical in humans can cause a series of negative impacts, such as headache, fatigue, dizziness, and so on.

have increased at an average annual rate of almost 30% in recent years (CCICED, 2013). This situation not only undermines social cohesion, but also threatens China's green development plans. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that China has reached a critical point in its green transformation.

**Table 4: 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

Among various environmental protests in China, the anti-PX (Para-xylene) movement is among the most influential. Originating in Xiamen's anti-PX protest in 2007, citizens across China have rallied under the "anti-PX" banner and protested against the proposed construction of PX plants in or near their cities. Table 4 summarizes major anti-PX protests in China between 2007 and 2013. Most of these protests have been successful, producing a retreat on the part of local governments, and thereby making the anti-PX movement a very sensitive topic for Chinese officials. As the Associated Press comments:

*Example 13*

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, October 29, 2012)

In many respects, the anti-PX protests represent an increasingly common scenario in China: a Chinese city, a massive protest, and a wave of online attention. The broader social and political contexts are key to understanding why many conflicts in China are unfolding in radical ways. One popular narrative adopted in these protests is the story of a corrupt government working together with ruthless local capitalists. This basic storyline can help people make sense of a wide variety of issues, including

environmental conflicts. It is a common feature, for example, in Chinese popular culture: TV dramas focused upon high-profile anti-corruption cases were extremely popular among Chinese viewers before 2004<sup>27</sup> and one common plotline in these dramas involved the discipline and punishment of ruthless *local* officials at the hands of good officials from the central government. Notwithstanding the unique environmental characteristics of the anti-PX movement, it shares many similarities with other public protests in China. Many oppose the construction of PX projects 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.

In addition to the historical legacy of anti-PX movements around China, the time and location are also crucial for understanding the anti-PX protest in Ningbo. The protest occurred only two weeks before CCP's 18th National Congress, the once-a-decade transition of power in China. With stability being paramount during the political sensitive period, protests like Ningbo were highly undesirable from the perspective of the Chinese leadership. As a result, the Ningbo protest 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, October 28 2012).

As a coastal city, Ningbo has a long time engagement with the chemical industry. Surrounded by several industry development zones, the Zhenhai district has a rising death rate associated with cancer-related diseases, which was a subject of major concern for local residents even before the protest started. The introduction of the PX plant, in that sense, served as the proverbial "last straw".

#### *Example 14*

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...

<sup>27</sup> 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.

(Chemical Plant Protesters Keep up Pressure, AP, October 25, 2012)

In short, the significance of the Ningbo protest should be understood from its connection with other anti-PX movements across China and its unique time and location. These factors played a key role in both the Chinese government's imposition of strict censorship, as well as the "liberal protest" interpretation storyline that was adopted by media overseas.

A general survey of the news coverage reveals a number of basic facts: a variety of demonstrations occurred on Ningbo's streets between October 23 and 28, 2012. According to the news, 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 specific details of the demonstrations are difficult to verify given the conflicting accounts of the protest offered by domestic and international media. According to the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily*, the protests were peaceful and few violent incidents occurred. By comparison, *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press reported that the Ningbo government had to mobilize riot polices and arrest hundreds of protestors to stabilize the situation.

### **6.3.2. Analyzing the protest: Discourses, frames, and story lines**

The story line offered by the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* explained the Ningbo protest as a social riot caused by "innocent citizens". This story line admitted the inadequacy of "transparency" during the review of the PX project and the need for "environmental considerations" in China's future economic development, but it failed to systemically assess the Ningbo municipal government's authoritarian policy-making procedure. In this regard, the reports published inside Mainland China emphasized that "greening China" requires no radical change of the existing economic and political structures. By comparison, the story line offered by *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press defined the protest as a "liberal movement" led by the rebellion of China's rising middle-class against an authoritarian government. This story line depicted a politically unstable scenario in Ningbo and its connection with the entire China's political uncertainty caused by its environmental challenges. In this regard, the reports

published outside Mainland China used environmental protests and related social disruptions as a stick with which to beat the Chinese central government.

Both storylines, however, are problematic from an environmental justice perspective. The peasants in Zhenhai, whose actions initiated the entire movement, all but disappeared from the news when massive urban protest in Ningbo broke out. 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.

The contradictions between the two story lines are rooted in the following aspects of the coverage. First, the competing storylines had very different depictions of the major social actors involved in the event. The headlines from the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* intentionally deemphasized the Ningbo protest itself. In fact, the word “protest/protestor” only appeared once (i.e. “Eastern China City Defends Chemical Plant after Protests”, XNA, October 24, 2012) in the titles from the two media. By comparison, the headlines from *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press emphasized the Ningbo protestors, as shown in titles such as “Protests over Chemical Factory Resume in China” (AP, October 28, 2012) and “Tensions Mount as Police Grab Protesters in China” (AP, October 28, 2012).

Similarly, reports by the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* made a clear distinction between “ordinary” Ningbo residents and those who went on the streets, which had the effect of “demonizing” the protest action and creating perceptions of “internal enemies” among Ningbo residents. For instance, one commentary article from the Xinhua News Agency explicitly criticized the irrational behavior during the protest via a statement from the Zhenhai district government:

*Example 15*

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, October 24, 2012)

By comparison, the reports by *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press blurred the line between “residents” and “protestors”. According to their coverage, the 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. SINA Weibo). By emphasizing the protest’s large scale and dramatic process, these reports depicted a “liberal movement” initiated by China’s rising middle class in Ningbo.

#### *Example 16*

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, October 27, 2012)

In a similar vein, the Ningbo municipal government was also represented quite differently news from inside Mainland China as compared to news outside Mainland China. Both the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* basically deemphasized the Ningbo municipal government’s actions against the protestors. Alleged violent conflicts between armed police and protestors which occurred on October 27 and 28, for instance, was absent from these reports. Instead, the coverage spent much more time exploring the “lessons” taught by the protest and citing statements of key government officials which illustrated the government’s apparent willingness to cope with the rising “environmental consciousness” in China. By contrast, the reports by *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press tended to focus on Ningbo’s police force and municipal government instead of the Chinese central government. Their detailed description of the turmoil caused by the protest, combined with their extensive discussions of CCP’s 18th National Congress, highlighted the enormous political pressure upon the CCP during this sensitive period.

The analyzed news coverage showed no observable involvement of Sinopec (the state-owned corporation investing the PX project) and ENGOs during the protest. This was quite interesting given that both corporations and NGOs often become visible actors during other environmental incidents (e.g. the Beijing smog). Sinopec's absence may be attributed to its consideration of the unknown political risks for involvement. Despite the relatively long history of Chinese ENGOs, they all remained silent and distanced themselves (at least publicly) from the demonstrations, a clear contrast to the leading role that ENGOs frequently play in environmental protests in the developed world. As noted in Chapter Two, the Chinese government holds a very conservative view on the role of ENGOs in China. Consequently, Chinese ENGOs must constantly struggle to maintain their legitimacy by, in large part, ensuring they are cooperative partners with local governments (Xie, 2009). Under such circumstances, involvement in demonstrations like the Ningbo protest is a serious risk for an ENGO, as it can put them on the Chinese government's black list.

As early studies of Chinese media coverage on social riots suggest (e.g. Fang, 1994, 2001), textual elements -- such as lexical choices, grammatical elements, and thematic structures -- are crucial for the construction of particular versions of "political reality". In regard to the Ningbo case, analysis reveals two conflicting frames: "unfortunate incident" versus "liberal movement". Most coverage provided by the Xinhua News Agency and *China Daily* was published after the protest's dramatic ending and as a result, the Ningbo protest was primarily discussed as background information, an unfortunate event that had already occurred. The major foci of 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, and adopting a commentary narrative style. Consequently, the protest itself was constructed as an "unfortunate event" with little specific information. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a commentary published by *China Daily*, which simply defined the protest as background information: no details of the protest was discussed.

### *Example 17*

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, November 5, 2012)

On the contrary, reports by *South China Morning Post* and the Associated Press were primarily published during the climax of the protest (October 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>). These reports offered details of the protest (the scale of the demonstrations, the conflicts between the police and the protestors, the censored discussions on SINA Weibo, etc.) and described it as a call for security and democracy from the Chinese rising middle class. The following excerpt comes from *South China Morning Post*, in which the violent confrontations were depicted in great detail.

### *Example 18*

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 protesters 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 1,000 Protest over Chemical Plants, SCMP, October 28, 2012)

Both the “unfortunate incident” and “liberal movement” frames are problematic from an environmental justice perspective. The “unfortunate incident” frame, besides its questionable propaganda purpose, fails to acknowledge the severe environmental injustice between China’s urban and rural areas due to the country’s aggressive economic development in the past three decades. 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. As such, 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 “liberal movement” frame largely defines the Ningbo protest as a middle-class rebellion. Such a definition is problematic since the actual social class structure of the protesters is never described or investigated. To some extent, this view has generalized China’s class struggles from a Western-centric perspective, translating China’s environmental politics into a simple democracy frame. The large-scale demonstrations in Ningbo originated from a small-scale protest in nearby Zhenhai County in which local peasants sought increased compensation from the local government. Even when the protest later spread to the Ningbo city and became a large-scale street demonstration, the social class of the protesters was never explicitly discussed in the collected news. One cannot simply describe the Ningbo Protest as a middle-class movement since “middle-class” itself is an ambiguous term in China’s current context.

Interestingly, all new sources described the Ningbo protest as a “NIMBY movement”. Compared with Western countries, the NIMBY label carries a much less negative tone in China. It fits into a more conventional narrative describing how economic wealth will ultimately be translated into political power/concern. Such labeling, however, should be cautiously interpreted. 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 public goods. Framing environmentalism in China as a middle class movement 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.

Moreover, the NIMBY label actual misrepresented the concerns of Zhenhai residents who had, in fact, hoped that the project would go ahead. As described in the previous section, the chemical industry has been a significant pillar for Ningbo's local economy long before the protest. The chemical industry's pollution had not been a critical concern of Ningbo residences when it was far from the urban district. The protests occurred only when an already existing industrial park wanted to expand and Ningbo residents worried that pollution from Zhenhai might spill over into Ningbo. The original appeal for constructing the PX project (which would have provided compensation for Zhenhai residents to move out an already heavily polluted area) was replaced by a call to permanently suspend the PX project; the original struggle of peasants in Zhenhai was displaced by the desires of affluent citizens in Ningbo. In short, describing the Ningbo protest as a "liberal movement" misrepresents the interests of Zhenhai residents, who initiated the protest but were eventually harmed by it since the suspension of the PX project ultimately made it impossible for them to leave the already polluted industrious area.

In conclusion, the depictions of the Ningbo protest are full of contradictions and biases. Indeed, 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. "Middle class environmentalism" serves as a powerful narrative affirming the developmental logic of Western society. The crucial justice component in global environmental movements has been dismissed.

## 6.4. Chapter Summary

The exploratory nature of the two case studies precludes any definitive conclusions about the nature of Chinese environmental journalism. However, both case studies suggest that a key feature of this journalism may be a general neglect of the concerns, interests and potential political agency of Chinese peasants and workers. Instead, it is the experiences of the “rising middle class” which attract the spotlight, both their suffering during the smog hazard in Beijing and their fight for the environment on the streets of Ningbo. 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 in recent years.

This biased discourse, however, 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 in the course of China’s environmental transformation.

## **Chapter 7. The Green Leap Forward**

In only a generation and a half, China has undergone a great transition that now touches every facet of the country, including the government, the people, civil society, and even intangible factors such as national identity and culture (Cao, 2014; Economy, 2010; Shapiro, 2012). As we look at the environmental challenges China is facing today, it is easy to be overwhelmed the enormity of these challenges and we cannot help ourselves worrying about the country's future.

For many senior citizens in China, memories of the "Great Leap Forward" are marked by collective zealousness and hardship. The movement is a near-perfect example of irrational instrumentality (Zhang & Barr, 2013) since everything was calculated to achieve a specific goal: to catch up and even surpass the industrial powers of the United Kingdom by boosting national iron and steel production. As Shapiro's (2001) historical research suggests, reckless pursuit of industrialization during the "Great Leap Forward" caused serious negative impacts to China's natural environment. Today, the specter of irrationality is once again haunting China. This time, the government and the people are driven by the pursuit of material affluence and endless desires of consumption. This tendency has generated mounting pressure on China's already fragile environment. It is so ironic to see that both planned economy and market economy have led to the deterioration of China's natural environment. With contemporary China's degrading environment, its increasing thirst for natural resources, and its alarming social stratification, there is little doubt that the country needs a "Green Leap Forward" (Zhang & Barr, 2013), in which all social classes should join together and initiate the progress of "ecological civilization".

One major issue the thesis has repeatedly addressed is the unique character of China's environmental challenges compared with those in the Western context. China's environment is beset by numerous interconnected and even conflicting factors. Many environmental protection efforts in China have been hampered by the country's East-

West divide, Urban-Rural divide, and unsolved ethnic issues. The progress made by middle class and ENGOs can be illusory if environmental issues tackled in the urban area are simply transferred to the rural area or even to other developing countries. Thus, to ensure the realization of a sustainable China, it is necessary to first recognize the inequality embedded in China's environmental issues.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the Chinese government's primary response to the degrading environment has been to adopt a modern (i.e. liberal-capitalist) style of environmental management system that emphasizes decentralized and market-based solutions. Many environmental scholars have pointed out and even criticized the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government. However, as Chapter Four demonstrates, China's current environmental governance should not be simply regarded as authoritarian environmentalism. Within China's system of governance, the central government sets broad national strategies while actual legislations and policy implementations are negotiated within bureaucratic agencies. It is no surprise to see how policies are distorted when they reach different local governments. Therefore, China's current environmental governance should be understood as a form of "fragmented environmentalism" (Zhang & Barr, 2013), which explains why the implementation of environmental policies is full of difficulties.

One main purpose of this thesis has been to elucidate the discursive dynamics in media coverage of China's environmental issues. By doing so, it promotes the understanding of how China's environmental challenges and its government's responses are discursively constructed in news media. In addition, it also makes a theoretical contribution to research on environmental communication in the context of developing countries. The media is regarded as a key sector of public engagement in today's network society (Lester, 2008). As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, current environmental media discourses in China are similar to and yet different from those in the Western context. Thus the confrontational strategies adopted by Western media and civil societies are rarely found in the Chinese context. Meanwhile, the two case studies in Chapter Six both indicate a lack of environmental justice perspective in China's current environmental policies and media practices. They also reveal the necessity of abandoning urban-centric and elitist perspectives embedded in the country's contemporary media practices. Indeed, the analyzed news reports told stories about the

seriousness of air pollution in Beijing and the political turmoil caused by the protest in Ningbo; what they did not tell, however, were the hardship experienced by migrant workers in Beijing and the desperation of peasants who lost their land due to pollution in Zhenhai.

What shall we do with China's environment and how shall we find a path forward? This big question cannot be addressed in a thesis. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: current environmental challenges in China are not just about developmental models or technical innovations; they are deeply embedded in the country's political economy. To some extent, these environmental incidents are public outcries against the blind pursuit of material affluence and the extreme social stratification in present-day China. The current situation invites a systemic reflection of current environmental policies in China. Shall we see a liberal model of environmental management in China, where market and democracy are adopted as the primary mechanisms to handle environmental risks; or shall we see an eco-socialism inspired model in China, where the "red and green alliance" would promote more egalitarian and radical reconfiguration of China's capitalist mode of production? The answer is yet to come.

Admittedly, this thesis has its limitations. The empirical analysis focused on the Chinese context, and the discursive patterns and struggles regarding environmental issues can be different in other countries depending on their economic, political, and social circumstances. Thus, it would be interesting to compare media practices in China with those in other countries. In particular, the situations of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) would warrant a valuable research project given the similarities and differences among these countries. Moreover, the empirical analysis here has mainly investigated discursive patterns and argumentative strategies. Further studies can go further to explore environmental discourses at verbal, phrasal, and textual levels. Rhetorical devices (e.g. metonymy and irony), for instance, are topics worth further research. Finally, in addition to texts, future studies could pay attention to multimodality by examining the role of visual and audio phenomena in the media.

There have been positive signs in China showing the government's dedication to tackle the country's huge environmental challenges. The 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (FYPs), which will be completed in 2015, has shifted the tone of "growth at any cost" toward a

“more balanced and sustainable growth pattern”. However, a real green revolution in China is yet to begin.

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## **Appendix A.**

### **List of Analyzed News Reports**

#### **1. The Smog Hazard in Beijing**

*China Daily* (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>)

- 1) Smoggy weather engulfs large areas of China (January 13, 2013)**
- 2) Healthy debate over air (January 14, 2013)**
- 3) Pollution masks given to outdoor workers (January 14, 2013)**
- 4) Expats struggle to breathe easy as smog continues to hang over city (January 14, 2013)**
- 5) Shoppers snap up air purifiers to beat the smog (January 15, 2013)**
- 6) Pollution may make economy splutter (January 15, 2013)**
- 7) Lesson of London must be learnt (January 16, 2013)**
- 8) Cold front to push away smog in central and eastern China (January 16, 2013)**
- 9) Li pledges measures in fight for clean air (January 16, 2013)**
- 10) Pollution triggers breathing woes (January 16, 2013)**
- 11) Sum of all fears (January 16, 2013)**
- 12) Food helps to resist pollution? (January 16, 2013)**
- 13) Car rules to help control smog (January 17, 2013)**
- 14) For cleaner air (January 17, 2013)**
- 15) Vehicle exhaust is biggest source of foul air: expert (January 17, 2013)**
- 16) A beautiful China must start with clean air (January 19, 2013)**
- 17) Anti-pollution plan gets mixed reviews (January 21, 2013)**
- 18) Snow brings travel delays as it clears the air (January 21, 2013)**
- 19) Blue-sky thinking may need new Olympian vision (January 24, 2013)**
- 20) City planning to dig deep to clear the air (January 24, 2013)**
- 21) Investors rush to buy shares in green companies (January 24, 2013)**
- 22) Environment becomes a priority (January 25, 2013)**

- 23) Minister unveils measures to cut pollution (January 25, 2013)**
- 24) Low-quality fuel near Beijing undermines air quality (January 26, 2013)**
- 25) Advisers call for regional efforts to reduce emissions (January 29, 2013)**
- 26) Pollution top for new Beijing leaders (January 29, 2013)**
- 27) Capital's concerns (January 29, 2013)**
- 28) Ongoing smog worries boost online sales of air purifiers (January 30, 2013)**
- 29) More breathing space (January 30, 2013)**
- 30) 'Joint effort' urged to clear the air (January 30, 2013)**
- 31) Government cars off road (January 30, 2013)**
- 32) Pollution prompts concern (January 31, 2013)**
- 33) Clear the smog (January 31, 2013)**
- 34) Traffic police ask to wear face masks (January 31, 2013)**
- 35) Demand for air monitors helps companies clean up (January 31, 2013)**

**The Xinhua News Agency (<http://www.xinhuanet.com>)**

- 1) Fog shrouds east, central china; disrupts traffic (January 12, 2013)**
- 2) Beijing air pollution reaches dangerous levels (January 13, 2013)**
- 3) China voice: brown skies obscure "beautiful china" ambitions (January 14, 2013)**
- 4) China voice: green storm invites public participation (January 15, 2013)**
- 5) Cold front dispersing Beijing smog, more efforts urged (January 16, 2013)**
- 6) Beijing plans fewer vehicles on roads during heavy air pollution (January 19, 2013)**
- 7) China exclusive: political sessions panting over "Beijing cough" label (January 22, 2013)**
- 8) China focus: Beijing chokes on smog amid annual legislative sessions (January 23, 2013)**
- 9) Foggy weather to afflict central, eastern china (January 27, 2013)**
- 10) China focus: Beijingers call for clean air act (January 29, 2013)**
- 11) Cities "gravely polluted" as haze covers regions (January 29, 2013)**
- 12) Web china: smog stirs firecracker complaints (January 30, 2013)**

- 13) Pollution reduction efforts need teeth (January 30, 2013)
- 14) Smog lingers despite rain in Beijing (January 31, 2013)
- 15) Smog choking swaths of china thinning out (January 31, 2013)

*South China Morning Post* (<http://www.scmp.com/>)

- 1) New readings reveal extent of pollution (January 3, 2013)
- 2) Transparency clears the sky (January 7, 2013)
- 3) Worst smog in a year blankets the capital (January 12, 2013)
- 4) Health alert as choking smog worsens in north (January 13, 2013)
- 5) Officials still blind to pollution (January 13, 2013)
- 6) Fog alert at record level: Beijing issues first orange fog alert (January 14, 2013)
- 7) Factories shut to try to curb air pollution (January 15, 2013)
- 8) Clean air should be a basic right (January 15, 2013)
- 9) Combating air pollution will take time, warns Li (January 16, 2013)
- 10) Choking pollution drives expats out of the capital (January 17, 2013)
- 11) Top adviser says weak rule of law fed pollution mess (January 21, 2013)
- 12) Snow clears smog but brings travel chaos (January 21, 2013)
- 13) Beijing pledges to reduce its air pollution (January 23, 2013)
- 14) Smog-hit city struggles to perform vanishing act (January 24, 2013)
- 15) Anti-pollution battle to be beefed up this year (January 25, 2013)
- 16) Acrid smog returns to envelop Beijing (January 28, 2013)
- 17) Worse air quality chokes Beijing (January 29, 2013)
- 18) Thick smog causes road, air chaos (January 30, 2013)

*The Associated Press* (<http://hosted.ap.org/>)

- 1) Air pollution in Beijing reaches hazardous levels (January 12, 2013)
- 2) Air pollution in Beijing goes off the index (January 13, 2013)
- 3) Severe Beijing smog prompts unusual transparency (January 14, 2013)

- 4) **Beijing warns residents after off-the-charts smog (January 14, 2013)**
- 5) **Smog thick enough to cancel flights hits Beijing (January 29, 2013)**
- 6) **China's love affair with cars chokes air in cities (January 31, 2013)**

## **2. The Anti-PX Protest in Ningbo**

***China Daily*** (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>)

- 1) **Projects urged more transparent on environment info (November 5, 2012)**
- 2) **Projects face greater checks (November 13, 2013)**
- 3) **The future is green (November 26, 2013)**

**The Xinhua News Agency** (<http://www.xinhuanet.com>)

- 1) **Eastern China city defends chemical plant after protests (October 24, 2012)**
- 2) **China Focus: CPC pledges to give the public more say (November 12, 2012)**

***South China Morning Post*** (<http://www.scmp.com/>)

- 1) **Chemical plant protesters keep up pressure (October 25, 2012)**
- 2) **Scuffles as 1,000 protest over chemical plants (October 28, 2012)**
- 3) **Heed Ningbo call for change (October 30, 2012)**
- 4) **Vow to halt plant expansion met with skepticism (October 30, 2012)**
- 5) **Rising activism poses challenge (October 31, 2012)**
- 6) **Public interest litigation is in everyone's best interest (November 8, 2012)**

**The Associated Press** (<http://hosted.ap.org/>)

- 1) **China residents protest chemical factory expansion (October 27, 2012)**
- 2) **Protests over chemical factory resume in China (October 28, 2012)**
- 3) **Tensions mount as police grab protesters in China (October 28, 2012)**
- 4) **China steps carefully with protesting middle class (October 29, 2012)**
- 5) **Chinese protest factory even after official pledge (October 29, 2012)**