
2. The Place of Social Networks in the Chinese Environmental Movement: Influence, Identity Formation and Activism

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Résumé

China's economic growth came together with negative externalities, such as environmental degradations. This gave birth to social movements and, in particular, the creation of NGOs. However, to develop, these NGOs and their leaders, have to develop specific networks not only with the political and bureaucratic spheres, but also within the economic realm. In China, independent organizations have difficulties to exist, and networks with politicians or bureaucrats help obtain the necessary authorizations and licences, circumscribe the repressive nature of the political system (in particular in cities like Shanghai or, to a lesser extent, Beijing), and access information. In the economic sphere, networks are not only necessary to ensure the survival and the development of the organization, but also the mobilization of internal and external resources and achieve specific objectives.

Therefore, the development of environmental NGOs in China cannot only be explained in terms of coping with negative externalities, but also by the mobilization of economic and non-economic resources (Steiner 2016). In other words, (the diversity of) networks can be analysed as hybrid structures (Granovetter 1985; Boyer, Laferte and Boyer 2007) which permit the usage of resources which are both in the economic and non-economic spheres. Here, the realization of specific objectives can only be done thanks to the usage of these hybrid structures.

In order to show the importance of networks and their links to different spheres of the economy and the political/bureaucratic apparatus, the presentation will be based on four cases of environmental NGOs. These case studies will be analysed in a qualitative way, showing how the leader or founder of the NGOs has developed and mobilized a great diversity of networks, and how this mobilization led to success or failure of the movement. Even though the number of case studies is small, it allows for a thin analysis of the dynamics at play for the creation and development of NGOs in China, in relation to the complicated economic, social and political system.

Mots-Clés: social networks, China, environmental movement, activism

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