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ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS REPORTS IN CHINA

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The ceremony for the “Champions of the Earth,” the most influential environmental award of the United Nations system, was held in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2017. That year, the Chinese bicycle-sharing company Mobike received this coveted honor (Tencent Science and Technology, 2017). In her acceptance speech, Mobike founder and president Hu Weiwei said, “Small bikes can not only change people and cities, but they can also change the world – it is both a symbol of peace and a weapon against climate change” (GentlemanZ, 2017).

China’s green economy is going global. Environmentalists have been working hard for this change, and environmental journalism has developed as well. As of June 2006, the total number of central and local environmental publications and magazines that have been publicly distributed in China has reached 423. These include the following four categories: forestry ecology (121), environmental protection (47), other resources (203), and comprehensive environmental news (52) (Chen, Qiu, & Huang, 2006).

Environmental news on TV and the Internet has also been greatly promoted by print media. Some mainstream TV stations and portal websites have established environmental programs or columns, such as CCTV10’s “Green Space,” Shaanxi Television’s “Environmental Protection Space-Time,” and Nanjing TV’s “Save 365.” The development of online news is in full swing, including China Environmental News Network, the Environmental Protection Channel of the People’s Website, and the Green Channel of Tencent. As environmental journalism becomes more mainstream, terms such as “climate change,” “biodiversity,” “sustainable development,” “energy conservation,” and “low-carbon” are no longer strange. With increasing familiarity, people are able to carefully consider the threats posed by the development of material civilization to the natural ecology of their world.
The development of environmental communication in China

The concept of “environmental protection” was not familiar to most Chinese people before 1970. At that time, the term “public hazard” was commonly used to describe the environmental pollution that occurred in Western countries (Zou & Gu, 1991). At that time, China was under the control of the ultra-left. People were told that the environmental pollution in the West was incurable. They did not know that China was undergoing environmental damage as well.

However, Premier Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People’s Republic of China (who was in charge of government affairs and state affairs) was aware of the problems caused by industrial pollution. He mentioned the “public hazard” issue from time to time, noting the seriousness of environmental issues. In the early 1970s, Ms. Asanuma Michiko, the wife of the former chairman of Japan’s Socialist Party, visited China. She was accompanied by a reporter who specialized in environmental news. Premier Zhou questioned this journalist about the public hazards in Japan and learned his views on environmental issues. In 1972, shortly after this meeting, Premier Zhou sent a Chinese delegation to the first United Nations Human Environment Conference in Stockholm. The Chinese delegates “returned with a new idea to China: environmental protection” (Bei Zi, 2004, p. 9). In the view of Qu Geping, a first-generation environmentalist of New China, this was a major sign of change (Yu & Li, 2015).

China’s interest in environmental protection followed the “government-led” model (Wang, 2011, p. 76). In this model, government is responsible for environmental protection. It not only formulates and implements relevant laws and regulations, but also promotes environmental protection. Therefore, the mainstream media, which are primarily operated by the Chinese government, took the lead in environmental publicity. People’s Daily, China Youth Daily, and other newspapers began to open columns for environmental reports. The Central People’s Television set up the “Green Time and Space” section; the Central People’s Broadcasting Station launched “Green FM.” In addition, with the official establishment of China Environmental News in 1983, local environmental newspapers such as Shandong Environmental News and Shanxi Environment News emerged one after another. As a result, environmental issues were formally incorporated into the media agenda. The start of environmental news spawned the earliest group of environmental journalists in China. They were the first to understand the state of environmental pollution and damage in their country, and they began to report their concerns with a critical eye.

In 1986, the China Forum of Environmental Journalists was established. In the same year, Sha Qing, a Beijing Evening News reporter, “felt the heavy breathing of nature first” (Zhang & Wu, 2007) and published his first comprehensive ecological report, “Beijing Lost Balance.” The work described the reality of Beijing’s water shortage, caused by excessive groundwater extraction. “The water that all living creatures rely on has been squeezed to a disgusting level in Beijing,” he wrote (Zhou & Fu, 1999). Afterward, Sha Qing wrote two articles, “The Grand City” (1987) and “Visible Dadiwan – Me or Our Spiritual Reality” (1988), focusing on urban waste and soil erosion on the Loess Plateau, respectively.


In 1985, the Greenland, a supplement of China Environmental News, solicited “environmental literature.” As a result, there was an increase in reports recording the mounting environmental and ecological crisis. During this period, the concept of “environmental protection” was introduced into Chinese journalism, and people began to pay attention to various aspects of the
ecological crisis. Deforestation, water pollution, and land desertification were of particular concern. Environmental reports also concentrated on these topics. These works generally focused on domestic environmental issues and, with a strong sense of warning and nationalism, tended to transform the national consciousness. However, the reports at this time were relatively simple and did not emphasize in-depth inquiry.

**Government-led environmental communication in the 1990s**

In the early 1990s, writers Wang Meng, Feng Mu, and Xu Gang initiated the creation of the China Environmental Culture Promotion Association (CECPA). In 1992, following the concept of “green civilization,” CECPA organized *Green Leaf*, the first publication in China that specifically published environmental literary works. The name *Green Leaf* was taken from O. Henry’s short story “The Last Leaf,” in which painting a “green leaf” preserves life. *Green Leaf* became the banner and core of China’s green literature and art of that time.

A distinction was made between environmental literature and environmental news. In the 1990s, as the focus of environmental reporting turned to deeper civic education, countermeasures, and related legal systems, environmental news distanced itself from environmental literature and moved towards a more independent and professional direction. As Zhang Wei (2007), the author of “Green News and the Rise of Chinese Environmental Reporters,” notes, “Environmental news not only has higher requirements than environmental literature in terms of reality and science but it also usually proposes solutions to problems” (p. 15).

During this period, the development of environmental news was dependent on the government’s participation and guidance. In 1993, China joined the International Association of Environmental Journalists. In the same year, the National People’s Congress Environmental Resources Committee, together with 14 departments, including the Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Ministry of Land and Resources, jointly organized a large-scale environmental protection publicity campaign called the “Trans-Century Cross-China Environmental Protection Tour.” Since the launch of this campaign, central media reporters have been traveling around the country. In 1998, the Trans-Century Cross-China Environmental Protection Tour organized a large-scale interview activity titled “Building Thousands of Miles Civilized Coastline,” in which reporters from more than 20 news agencies traveled along the Chinese coast, producing a series of powerful news reports, which attracted the attention of the central leadership (Li & Bai, 2003). Subsequently, the Chinese government introduced a related rectification plan and invested more than ¥60 billion to curb pollution in the Bohai Sea.

In the same period, the State Forestry Administration organized a large-scale interview activity called “Focus on Forest” and the Ministry of Environmental Protection conducted the “Focus on Lake Taihu Action” (1998) and the “Huai River Pollution Control Action” (1999). Such special interview activities have promoted the implementation of many environmental protection measures.

At the same time, urban newspapers have developed rapidly, and a large number of environmental columns have been created. Environmental information and environmental monitoring have become a part of people’s daily lives. In addition, inspired by large-scale interview activities, reporters began to try to “use the power of the media to wake up the public’s awareness of environmental protection and try to influence the government’s decision-making in daily environmental news” (Zhang Wei, 2007, p. 15).

Unlike the West, where non-governmental organizations are separate from media outlets, China’s non-governmental environmental protection organizations have been inextricably
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linked to the media from the very beginning. For example, “Green Homeland” is an NGO founded by Wang Yongchen, a reporter of the Central People’s Broadcasting Station, which uses reporters as its core team. “Green Homeland” not only actively uses its civil power to cooperate with the media, but also set up a communication platform among environmental journalists, other journalists, and experts, in which lectures are held on environmental subjects.

Wang Yongchen said that her own path to public environmental protection was closely related to the practice of environmental news. In 1993, she witnessed the hunting of wild yaks on the Tibetan Plateau. This touched Wang Yongchen greatly: “If you don’t see wild yaks running on the grasslands, killing a cow is just killing a cow. But in that state, you feel that they are innocent and you want to protect them. So I determined to tell more people about the beauty and the problems of nature in this life” (Gui Jie, 2015, p. 8).

In the late 1990s, environmental news appeared regularly on television. The most familiar programs at that time included CCTV’s *Environmental Protection Times* and *Green Time and Space*, CETV’s *Environmental Focus*, Shandong TV Station’s *Homeland*, Hubei TV Station’s *Lucky Global Village*, Jiangsu TV’s *Green Report*, and Phoenix Television’s *We Share a Single Earth*.

From 1990 to 1997, documentary director Liu Yujun repeatedly entered the Qinghai region in order to reveal the mysteries of Tibetan antelope breeding grounds. In the course of many years of exploration, he discovered that there were people living in harmony with nature, but there were also poachers engaged in extremely cruel killings of antelopes. In order to reflect the tragedy of the Tibetan antelope, Liu Yujun made a shocking anti-poaching documentary, *I and the Tibetan Antelope – Glacier Flows Here* (“Tencent: The Lifelong Commitment,” 2015).

At that time, the number of environmental newspapers and periodicals increased, and environmental news appeared on the front pages of mainstream media such as *People’s Daily* from time to time. In order to recognize journalists who made outstanding contributions to the promotion and education of environmental protection, the environmental good news awards, the “Dupont Award” and the “Earth Award,” were established.

By the end of the 20th century, the prosperous development of many different media and the emergence of environmental NGOs had resulted in a dramatic increase in environmental journalists and environmental news reporting.

**Environmental communication in the new century**

In the new century, environmental news gradually broke through the old official reporting system, arousing the attention and appreciation of the marketized media, and gradually became an independent news category.

*Southern Weekly*, founded in 1984, served as a bridge between intellectuals and the public. This orientation was consistent with the goals of national reform and “opening-up,” and helped it become a large comprehensive weekly newspaper. In 2009, *Southern Weekly* (also known as *Southern Weekend*) opened a “green” layout, focusing on the environmental issues of environmental protection, low-carbon, energy, and urban development. This paved the way for ecological dissemination in comprehensive mainstream newspapers. The editors wrote: “In the past 25 years, the heart of *Southern Weekly* has been beating with the times. This kind of heartbeat has created the miracle that news ideals have not fallen. Now, it has given birth to this ‘green’ newsprint. From October 8th, 2009, this paper will continue to provide in-depth investigations, insightful views, and wonderful news stories to win the respect of government officials, business elites, environmentalists and intellectuals in this country, to obtain the resonance of everyone who yearns for harmonious development and green homeland, allowing
each other’s heart to pulsate with the country’s green process” (“Green Studio [Opening Words],” 2018).

As one of the earliest Chinese newspapers to be marketized, and thus operate as a market-oriented firm, *Southern Weekly* was the “first branch flowers of spring” leading a trend of newspaper reform (“Introduction to *Southern Weekly*,” 2003). The *Southern Weekly* green edition would no longer engage in slogan-type propaganda, but instead put “events and problems in the specific social ecology and institutional context in which it is located, striving to present complex reality” (Zou, 2011, p. 38).

Also of great importance to Chinese environmental journalism in the 21st century is the role of China National Radio, and in particular, the career of Wang Yongchen, who has been called a “hero of the environment” by *Time* magazine (Ramzy, 2008) and “the Clark Kent of China” (China Program, 2016). She won the Globe Award, China’s most prestigious environmental award, in 2001. She was elected as a Chinese environmentalist in the 30th anniversary of reform and opening up in 2008. As both an environmentalist and a respected journalist, Wang Yongchen represents the energy and responsibility of Chinese environmental journalism in the practice of environmental protection.

**Interview with Wang Yongchen, China National Radio**

Q1: The past decade has witnessed rapid economic development as well as the frequent occurrence of environmental issues in China. How do you evaluate the impact of Chinese media on environmental issues?

Answer: China’s environmental movement has been traveling with the Chinese media since its inception. The first non-governmental environmental protection organization in China is Panjin Gull Conservancy, which was started by journalists. China’s earliest environmental actions, such as protecting Tibetan antelopes, Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys, Mugecuo (the sacred lake on the plateau), Dujiang Dam, and the Nu River (the last natural river) were all reported by the media before entering the public consciousness and influencing government decisions.

Environmental incidents in China have grown at 20% a year since 1996. That’s an amazing number. But we have also summarized a path with Chinese characteristics in the environmental movement to protect rivers.

Under our promotion and leadership, the Chinese media have joined hands with non-governmental environmental organizations to change the fate of several rivers in China since 2003. In these influential activities, I put forward several views on the role, responsibility, and influence of the media in the process of decision-making democratization in our country:

1. Media can bring environmental issues into public view and keep people’s attention on them;
2. Media can provide “diverse” and specialized voices in major environmental issues and become their carrier;
3. Media can convey new scientific ideas in the dissemination of major environmental issues;
4. Media can promote public participation.

Q2: Why did you choose environmental reporting as your career? How did you get involved in the activities of NGOs?
Answer: It all started with an interview I did on the Tibetan plateau in 1993. That time, I took a “cruiser” from Xining to Golmud. I met a lot of gold diggers along the way. With only a large bag of noodles and a small bag of salt, these people stay on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau for half a year. These gold diggers not only severely damaged the vegetation on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, but also shot the unique wildlife on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, such as wild yak, Tibetan antelope, and white-lipped deer.

At that time, in the gully of bison in Golmud, looking at the blue sky, the white clouds, the green grass, and the wild yak running with long black hair, I understood the paradise of wild animals as well as the harmony between human and nature. It was also the time that I saw the exposed hillsides of the plateau and the remains of rare wild animals after the gold mining. Their blood dripped on the gravel beside the stream. At that moment, I swore to myself: what I will do from now on is to tell more people about the beauty and ugliness of nature reserves.

I am a journalist, but since I started to pay attention to nature, my role as an environmental volunteer has become so intertwined with that of a journalist that the balance has even shifted. To this day, though, I still define myself as a journalist because it is more in keeping with my nature. But I know what I’ve been doing for a decade is offside for a professional journalist. Even today, I still record the environmental phenomena around me through microblog, WeChat, and other media.

Journalists, known as uncrowned kings, have a special status in China. The work of these practitioners plays such an important role in publicity, education, and popularization that there are endless examples. There are many advantages for journalists to improve their environmental awareness and participate in environmental protection activities. The first is to be able to access a variety of ecological environmental information, and quickly publicize it. Secondly, the role of public opinion supervision sometimes exceeds the strength of law enforcement. And then there is a strong appeal. When environmental protection action is launched, the audience becomes the most active participant and it spreads fast and beyond imagination. The actions of participants, amplified by the media, will attract more public attention and enable citizens to join the ranks of environmental protection.

In 1994, my broadcast feature “This is Also a Hope Project,” which introduced the love of birds of the students in Dayu primary school, won the first prize of China environmental news. Then the radio program discussion on caged birds caused great repercussions in society. Later, the discussion was carried out in the program “Tell It Like It Is” of CCTV and dozens of newspapers and magazines across the country. My radio program “China Purple Mountain Observatory” won the first prize of “China Broadcasting News Award” and “China News Award” in 1996. Experts commented that the program combines journalism and knowledge to tell the audience about the relationship between humans and nature. All these make me further see the advantages of journalists’ participation in environmental protection. Such participation can not only arouse wide public discussion but also be recognized by experts and scholars.

In 1997, when I was sailing along the Yangtze River with journalists from several media organizations, I saw a passenger preparing to throw a white plastic box into the river. We stopped him and found that there was no garbage can on the ship. We asked the ship’s attendants about the garbage, and they all answered the same: throw it into the river. After returning to Beijing, I interviewed the Ministry of Transportation and the shipping administration department of the Yangtze River and learned that there were no regulations on the garbage disposal of passenger ships sailing on the Yangtze River.

After a lot of interviews on the spot and afterward, I produced the radio program “‘White’ the Yangtze River,” which was broadcast on China National Radio. The Ministry of Transportation
and China's State Environmental Protection Administration paid great attention to this program. Soon, “regulations banning the use of plastic lunch boxes on ships sailing along the Yangtze River” were introduced. China's State Environmental Protection Administration organized a large-scale inspection along the river to further formulate relevant legal provisions. I now understood the significant and important role played by the media.

In the summer of 1998, when there was a great flood in the Yangtze River, I entered the source regions of the Yangtze River with the China Women Scientific Expedition Team in Source Regions of the Yangtze River. In that interview, I recorded how the Yangtze River is made up of water from melting glaciers and a large number of audio materials about the source area of the Yangtze River. I learned about the recent changes in the world's third pole, the Tibetan Plateau, and the ecological challenges it faces as a result of global warming. Fellow scientists say the source of the Yangtze was shrinking beyond recognition compared with just a few years ago. One scientist told his own story: he once dug a small piece of frozen soil in Source Regions of the Yangtze River to study. However, the originally green mountain became bald unexpectedly a few years later. The ecology of the plateau is too fragile to be reversed once destroyed. The scientist told me sadly that humans have done too many foolish things because of our lack of knowledge of nature. To protect nature, we were supposed to start from knowing and understanding nature. If you don’t know and understand nature, how can you live in harmony with nature?

After 40 days of close contact with nature and deep understanding of nature, the radio program “Towards the Disappearing Glacier” won the Asia Pacific regional broadcasting union radio program awards in 1999. An expert commented that the reporter had reached a state of harmony with nature.

I am more and more aware that the media are an important way for the public to better understand nature and protect the environment. In 1999, I launched the programs “Environmental Protection Hotline,” “Animal World,” and “Walking into the Green Homeland Nature Reserve” on China National Radio.

A radio listener who had passed through Li County, Hebei province had found that the water from a small leather workshop had seriously polluted the local farmland. He called “Environmental Protection Hotline” to report the situation. Local villagers heard the broadcast and called immediately. They told “Environmental Protection Hotline” about the unsolved problem of badly polluted farmland and put their hopes on radio programs. In order to help the audience solve this serious water pollution problem, I made a follow-up report and called the environmental protection departments in Hebei and Baoding. Following their advice, the County Chief of Li instructed that, in accordance with state regulations, the small leather workshops had to be closed down as soon as possible. The pollution that had plagued local farmers for years had finally been solved through media intervention.

In Hangzhou Gudang, an ancient town named for its abundance of water, the last local lake was scheduled to be filled because of real estate development. Local people called “Environmental Protection Hotline” to ask us to appeal in the program: for our ecological environment, for their own homes, please leave this lake. During the program, I contacted the local media and asked them to join our appeal. The mayor of Hangzhou was alerted. Under his watch, the local construction department drastically revised the original design, preserving the lake.

Shangri-la means fairyland. In 1999, when I was interviewed in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Shangri-la, I learned that the local people who rely on logging had encountered great difficulties due to the state's ban on cutting down natural forests. It is difficult for journalists to give the public an answer about how to deal with the relationship between environmental protection and economic development. So, we had a discussion in the program “Walking into
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the Green Homeland Nature Reserve” to let audience members express their opinions. At that
time, the ecological compensation mechanism was one of the methods proposed by the audi-
ence. Seven years later in 2006, Wang Jirong, deputy director of China’s State Environmental
Protection Administration and a member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National
Committee, gave a report on the application of an ecological compensation mechanism in
environmental protection.

It was in the process of producing these radio programs that I became more and more aware
of the positive significance of media participation in environmental protection and public par-
ticipation in environmental protection.

Q3: What kind of issues do you pay most attention to in China’s environmental news reports?
Why?

Answer: The ecological issue of “major rivers” is what I devote the most attention to. Green
Homeland’s “Ten Years Rivers Visiting” is an action plan to focus on and monitor hydro-
power development in western China. It has been in operation for 10 years. The original
intention was to raise concern about the rivers in China, and to record the changes of riv-
ers and the fate of people along with rivers from the perspective of journalists. We not only
recorded, but also told the public the problems, affected the decision-making, and protected
the stakeholders.

Every year, we organize about 20 journalists and experts to continuously track and record
the ecological environment and human settlements of the great rivers in southwest China. We
have documented the impact of climate change and development activities on the ecology of
rivers and the lives of people living among them. We put forward reasonable proposals for the
protection of rivers in the west and advocated information disclosure and public participation
in river development.

During that decade from 2006 to 2016, the influence of this activity became more and more
significant, playing an active role in expanding citizens’ right to know about public environ-
mental events and expanding citizen participation in public policies. We can even say that, from
the current impact, “Ten Years Rivers Visiting” is affecting the government’s decision-making in
river development.

The media battle of the Nu River is very typical. As a result of media intervention, a dis-
pute between the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the National
Environmental Protection Agency over whether to leave China with its last natural river has not
only become a public issue but also attracted wide attention from the international community.
It is regarded as a successful example of Chinese folk influence on public policy.

Since 2003, when environmental journalists first reported about the debate on whether
the Nu River could be dammed, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has given three approvals
of our efforts (in 2004, 2008, and 2011). In February 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao told the
National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) about the “Hydropower Plan-
ning Report on the Middle and Lower Reaches of the Nu River.” This report stated that
such large hydropower projects, which have aroused great concern from the society and
different opinions on environmental protection, should be carefully studied and scientifi-
cally decided. After three instructions from Premier Wen Jiabao, the damming on the Nu
River was stopped. For the first time in China, the Prime Minister commented that a project
report “aroused great concern from the society.” What is “society?” Society should be where
the public can influence decisions. The action to protect the Nu River was an iconic, even
landmark event.

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In the debate over hydropower since 2003, one view has been that the media are the anti-dam. People who hold this view even believe that the reason why some people in society question the large-scale construction of dams is related to media propaganda.

In fact, there are far more positive reports about hydropower projects in the media than doubts. Nevertheless, it is a new phenomenon that there is a debate over dam construction in the media. This phenomenon is directly related to the process of democratization of decision-making in our country and the role and responsibility of the media.

Compared with previous reports on engineering, the media’s response to a proposed mega-project has changed from “good” to “diverse voices.” The content of media reports goes far beyond the simple “anti-dam” and “dam” debate. The media are delivering new ideas. The media are calling for public participation.

Our “Ten-year Yellow River Visiting” started in 2010. Today, in China, the microblog has become an important platform to spread information, adding a powerful new voice in communication.

Q: You not only report on environmental issues, but you have also set up an “Environmental Journalist Salon,” inviting experts in environmental science to communicate with journalists every month. What are the implications of these actions for environmental journalism in China? How do you think Chinese environmental journalists should expand their professional careers? Should environmental journalism education be both scientific and professional?

A: After listening to my program about environmental protection, listeners often write to me and say: there is environmental destruction around us, but we don’t know how to stop it. We also want to take part in the environmental protection activities you mentioned, but we don’t know where to find such activities to join in. Others said that although we are not involved in any action to protect the environment, if someone is doing it, we would like to express our support for these actions in a way that is within our power.

I deeply feel from the audience’s feedback that journalists are the bridge that connects all sides.

In the summer of 2000, we started the journalist salon. At present, the journalist salon project has been held regularly in Beijing. The green journalist salon was originally established to train journalists who had not received ecological knowledge training. Later, it was transformed into a platform for exchanging information, discussing problems, and debating social issues.

In 2006, Green Earth Volunteers brought journalist salons to 10 provincial capitals with the support of some foundations and began to settle down in Shanghai in 2010, co-hosted with Shanghai Jiao Tong University every two months. The environmental journalist salon invites people who have experience and lessons in getting along with nature to talk about their knowledge and understanding of nature for journalists. I think the environmental journalist salon is also a classroom. Journalists who pay attention to the ecological environment here are improving their understanding of nature and the environment as well as their awareness of environmental protection. Environmental journalist salon is a platform. Here, journalists exchange information, foster friendships, and discuss action.

The trees along the Jingmi diversion canal in Beijing were about to be cut down. In the salon, we tried to report the problem to the relevant departments and reported the incident separately, hoping that the ax will not be lifted in the future. Some in Beidaihe, an important wetland for bird migration in northeast Asia, wanted to establish an international convention...
center. A reporter put it forward in the salon. Everyone worked together and preserved the bird’s favorite place to stay.

This opened the journalist salon’s information communication function. Due to China’s national conditions, environmental protection organizations have very limited means of social mobilization, and mass media coverage of environmental issues is often an acceptable means for the public. However, environmental journalists in China are often not trained and lack information sources. So, the green journalist salon began to assume this function.

In addition, the journalist salon also promoted the transformation of technology into reality, especially in terms of environmental protection. Now, the journalist salon will selectively introduce some new environmental protection inventions and technologies. The reporters’ understanding and interest also mean the readers’ and listeners’ understanding and interest.

Q5: As one of the most representative environmental journalists in China, what do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of China’s environmental news reporting in terms of establishing a dialogue with the world and joint discussion of environmental issues?

Answer: As a Chinese environmental journalist, I was once questioned as being offside by my foreign colleagues when I attended international conferences. Am I a journalist or an activist? But China has special circumstances. China has lots of laws. But enforcement of laws is always a big concern here. In such circumstances, the role of journalist as the uncrowned king becomes significant, which means Chinese journalists of mainstream media play a very important role to bring public voice to decision makers through different media channels.

The nature of a journalist’s work made it impossible for a journalist to focus on an issue for a long time, so I set up an environmental NGO. It connects environmental journalists and draws policymakers’ attention to major environmental issues through continuous reporting. This is an important way for the media and journalists to contribute to environmental issues. Many foreign experts I know realized the benefits of connecting NGO and media to solve environmental problems in China.

In recent years, due to the rapid development of Internet technology, access to information is getting more and more diversified, which greatly affects the relationship between NGOs and media. Environmental protection and environmental activities are facing unprecedented challenges. Although more and more young people join the team of NGOs, the opinions in media are unified as one voice, which makes it very difficult for the public to improve their consciousness about environmental protection actions. So, I believe to improve the enforcement of laws and to have more participation by the public on environmental protection are the two key aspects needed to be addressed here.

**Environmental communication today**

In the 21st century, the Chinese government has paid increasing attention to environmental protection and governance. It has put forward concepts such as the “scientific development concept,” the “resource-saving society,” and the “environment-friendly society.” Media coverage is no longer limited to China. It has begun to attach importance to environmental issues around the world.

During this period, along with the rapid development of online media, Chinese environmental websites were created. As an important platform for the dissemination of environmental news, environmental websites (such as China Environmental News, China Environmental Protection
Network, and Friends of Nature) have made it possible for environmental news to be spread rapidly and widely. The rise of social media is also of great significance to the spread of environmental news. Social media’s strong “opinion leader” influence during environmental emergencies and the more realistic expression of opinions regarding environmental issues have made these media a powerful weapon for environmental protest.

As of the end of 2005, there were 2,768 various types of environmental NGOs in China (“Report on the Development of Environmental NGO’s,” 2006). As noted earlier, these civil environmental organizations have been in close contact with the media since their inception. Environmental NGOs have expanded from environmental publicity and species conservation to include public participation, social supervision, and other means of actively promoting the development of national environmental protection. Under the concerted efforts of the media and environmental NGOs, some environmental issues have become public issues, which have influenced government decision-making through public opinion. The “Dujiangyan Irrigation Project” (2000), “Old Summer Palace Lake Bottom Anti-Seepage Project” (2005), and “Songhua River Pollution” (2005) are reflections of the concerted efforts of the media and environmental protection organizations.

With the advance of globalization, some foreign media and environmental NGOs have focused their attention on China’s environmental issues. In particular, the controversy surrounding the construction of the Nu River Dam in 2003 resulted in a fierce conflict among local governments, environmental NGOs, and experts. This controversy aroused widespread concern among international organizations and media both at home and abroad. The construction of the Nu River Dam finally came to an end with the Central Government's decision to delay the plan.

Environmental news is now an independent news category tied to politics, the economy, and culture. Environmental reports have not only become more abundant, but also increasingly have shown diversified voices. Radio, television, newspapers, the Internet, and other media have jointly conducted serial reports, follow-up reports, and news surveys regarding environmental emergencies and large-scale environmental protection activities.

While Chinese environmental journalism has developed enormously in the past four decades, Chinese journalists have encountered many difficulties during this period. The first issue is the environmental expertise bottleneck faced by environmental journalists. Most of the environmental reporters in China were journalism or literature majors. As a consequence, their natural science knowledge was insufficient, and so when interviewing others, they did not know where to begin, and it was difficult to discern the opinions of all parties. The development of instant online media news has exacerbated this problem.

Second, some environmental journalists are considered “offside,” a term which refers to an imbalance between objective reporting and environmental protection propaganda (Cao Qian, 2010). Some are considered “offside” because they are also environmentalists who are active on the public welfare stage. Such double identities are likely to create an environmental reporting bias. “Offside” has become an ethical dilemma faced by environmental reporters concerned that this phenomenon erodes the objectivity of news and the credibility of environmental journalists. Wang Yongchen, who has been called both “the Clark Kent of China” and a “hero of the environment,” recognizes this issue. Mrs. Wang, who defines herself as a journalist, argues that China has special circumstances that sometimes necessitate such a duality (see her interview above).

Finally, although the news media have gradually adapted to the laws of market operation, the long-term, government-led model has caused many problems, such as a “strong political color, prominent tool characteristics, and marginalization of public interests” (Wang, 2011).
Environmental news reports in China

What is the future of China’s environmental news?

Environmental journalism has become an indispensable part of mainstream reporting. The scope and depth of this coverage are constantly expanding. As the level of experience of environmental journalists increases, China’s environmental news is likely to develop in the direction of specialization. The rise of online media and the emergence of “self-media,” such as Weibo and Wechat, have created large numbers of citizen environmental journalists, each with his or her own individual opinion. Thus, environmental news in China is moving toward “The Age of Citizen Environmental Reporting” (Su, 2009).

The coverage of the chemical explosion in Tianjin in August 2015 represents the quality of the best environmental journalism in China today. Beijing News reporter Tu Zhonghang and his colleagues rushed to the scene and reported on the causes of the explosion. They found several types of hazardous chemicals on site, multiple problems existing in the environmental assessment, several loopholes in the regulatory system, and many hidden safety hazards on the site. In the same year, China Youth Daily reporters Liu Xing, He Linxuan, and Lu Yijie visited three major port cities, Shanghai, Ningbo, and Qingdao, to investigate the potential safety hazards of chemical storage. The resulting investigative report not only analyzed these hazards, but also put forward constructive opinions of the system. These journalists truly fulfilled their responsibility as reporters: “If the country is a ship sailing in the sea, journalists are the watchmen of the bow. He wants to observe everything on the endless sea, examine the storms and shallow reefs at sea and issue warnings in time” (Sun, 2016).

Since the 1970s and 1980s, China’s environmental news has gradually become an independent news category step by step. In the past 40 years, the form of environmental news has become increasingly diverse. The newspaper was the only one true superpower in the early years. Nowadays, newspapers, TV, and online news complement each other perfectly. The content of environmental news is becoming more and more abundant. Environmental news initially only focused on the state of ecological damage. Then the media began to pay attention to environmental issues and emerging environmental topics around the world. The number of environmental reports is increasing, and the status is greatly improved. Environmental news is moving in the direction of rationality, depth, and specialization. In the foreseeable future, China’s environmental news will continue to move toward specialization, strengthening the scientific nature of environmental reporting and independent thinking of the overall ecological awareness and environmental values. The media will also further expand the breadth and depth of environmental news, and on this basis, explore international disputes behind environmental problems such as pollution, pollution control, and energy exploitation.

References


