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A Reconsideration of Environmental NGOs and the Environmental Governance of Social Transformation in China: The paradigm shift from “State and Society” to “Institutions and Life”

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Abstract

China has undergone a social transformation since the establishment of its Reform and Opening-Up Policy, becoming a market economy under a socialist system. However, environmental problems associated with urbanization and economic development have become increasingly serious, and the government has been unable to address these problems.

This situation was affected by the emergence of environmental NGOs in the 1990s, which played an important role in environmental governance. Previous researchers have used the “state and society” paradigm, which is based on civic society theory, to analyze the development of environmental NGOs in China and determine whether environmental NGOs are independent from the powerful government in environmental governance. The aim of these studies is to answer questions like “Are there environmental NGOs that operate autonomously under the current situation of strong state power in China?” or “What kind of relationships do environmental NGOs have with the state and what functions do they perform in the public domain of environmental governance?”

The authors’ previous study found that the development of environmental NGOs differs from the trend of the “state and society” paradigm because NGOs interact with the strong government in various senses of development in social transformation in China. Social transformation researchers have found that the “state and society” paradigm does not fit the reality of China, so they have established the “institutions and life” paradigm.

The aim of this study is to investigate the limits of the “state and society” paradigm presented in earlier studies and introduce an alternative paradigm of “institutions and life” to explain the involvement of NGOs and the environmental governance of social transformation in China. Here, “institutions” refers to formal institutions established in the name of the state

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that support its agents at various levels and in different departments in the exercise of their functions, and “life” refers to the everyday activities of social beings, involving not only the interests, powers, and rights-based claims of expedient production and life strategies and techniques, but also relatively routine popular mores and informal institutions.

According to this new paradigm, environmental NGOs interact with the powerful government through informal practices like personal relationships. Moreover, these informal practices can gradually promote formal institutions, such as the government’s admission of the subjectivity of environmental NGOs in the establishment of the environmental governance system.

Key words: environmental governance; environmental NGOs; institution and life paradigm; social transformation in China; state and society paradigm

1. Introduction

Since its Reform and Opening-Up Policy in 1978, China has undergone a unique social transformation of developing a market economy under a socialist system. However, China's government has fallen into a situation that prevents China from keeping up with countermeasures against the increasingly serious environmental problems that accompany urbanization and economic development. Further, as companies and local governments successfully collaborate under the principle of economic growth supremacy, where "GDP comes first," they face the issues of "government failure" and "market failure" when taking measures against environmental problems. Subsequently, the shift from a two-dimensional "environmental government" of the conventional "government-market" paradigm (rule by the government) to a multidimensional "environmental governance" (cooperative rule by society) with citizen participation proved to be an expected breakthrough measure. Since the emergence of environmental NGOs that have independently formed from the private sector in the mid-1990s, it has been emphasized that an autonomous space that can compete with the state (i.e., an independent civic society) has also been formed in China (Zhao 2004; Wang 2014). These observations indicate the possibility that the introduction of environmental governance and the emergence of environmental NGOs are a tailwind for reforming the manner of state-centric governance that has, thus far, been based on a single resource distribution and power structure and is inevitably promoting the reconstruction of the state and society relationship.

However, the transformation model involved in the reconstruction between the state and society is recognized as a "State-Society" paradigm based on Western civic society theory. This concept has attracted particular attention in social science research since its spread to China in the 1990s, driven by China's overwhelming state power and researchers' longing for a "civic society." Accordingly, the previous research on environmental NGOs and the establishment of environmental governance in China, as detailed in Section 2, use the "State-Society" paradigm as a basic theory while adding further interpretation and exploring new directions (Koga 2010; Aikawa 2012; Li 2018). Their primary objectives have generally been to clarify the following questions: "Are there environmental NGOs that operate autonomously under the current situation of strong state power in China? What kind of relationships do environmental NGOs have with the state, and what functions do they perform in the public domain of environmental governance?"

Nevertheless, a prior study (Leng & Miyoshi 2022) addressed these questions from the perspective of the dynamic framework of environmental governance theory, where various actors collaborate. The study revealed that environmental NGOs that have been led by environmental protection-minded youths born after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy and have prospered since the 2008 Sichuan earthquake have been praised for their high academic background and high level of expertise in previous research (Li 2018). However, in practice, they are placed on a fragile social infrastructure, such as being harassed by local governments and companies and misunderstood by citizens. Meanwhile, the earliest

environmental NGOs created under stricter restrictions imposed by the government's "formal institution" have utilized long-standing relationships with local governments. The purpose is to construct a non-resistant environmental governance model that allows them to obtain legal status from the government and provide guidance to companies while using "informal institutions" such as their status as a member of the Political Consultative Conference National Committee. Therefore, the relationship between environmental NGOs and the government in China is, assumedly, mutually influential rather than merely a static structure where each entity acts independently and autonomously, as assumed by the logic of the "State-Society" paradigm (clearly, the real-world situation goes beyond that framework). Empirical studies on environmental NGOs are on the rise, and a dynamic interaction between the government and environmental NGOs has emerged regarding the practical activities of environmental governance, with environmental NGOs, for example, using their relationships with government officials to influence policies. These aspects indicate that the situation is no longer the antinomic static structure claimed by the conventional "State-Society" paradigm, as indicated by many researchers (Ma 2008; Jin 2012; Zhong 2016).

The theoretical limitations of the "State-Society" paradigm are evident in China and Hungary, which is transitioning to a post-socialist period. Rajkai (2010; 2012) referred to this aspect as the "deep penetration of the conflicts between various political parties into the intimate sphere, given the introduction of a multi-party system, even as civic society, which has not become independent from the political world, has only partially developed." He argued that the socialist period of the past has had a major impact on current system transformation. Therefore, he challenged the transformation model based on the capitalist modern civic society of the "State-Society" paradigm and offered a suggestive argument that states and societies should be viewed as dynamic entities that challenge each other's autonomy. Nonetheless, the conditions for China's social transformation differ from the democratic movements of Eastern European countries. Furthermore, Rajkai (2014: 127–129) indicated that "China, which calls itself 'socialist' despite the marketization of its economic system, has undergone a form of modernization that differs from classical (capitalist) modernization, and, even now, it is cautiously proceeding with system transformation, where the power of state control (particularly over civic society) remains strong."

Meanwhile, Chinese sociologists are also beginning to pay attention to the limitations of the "State-Society" paradigm. The paradigm is considered to be overly idealistic as a model theory for analyzing the realistic foundations of Chinese society, warranting a need to explore a new paradigm that is more realistic. Accordingly, on the subject of "Chinese transformation sociology,"¹¹ researchers from Shanghai University, including Youmei Li (2008) and Ying Xiao (2014), after carefully examining many case studies, proposed the "Institutions-Life" paradigm, an analytical framework that is an alternative to the "State-Society" paradigm. In this dynamic analytical framework, formal and informal institutions replace the state and society duality and consider actor-like factors such as agents while facilitating the transformation of formal institutions through complex interactions between government and social beings. However, this "Institutions-Life" paradigm is no more than a rudimentary discussion

of social transitions during the social transformation period. Thus, there is a need to examine in more detail its applicability to environmental governance and environmental NGOs and its specific applications.

Therefore, this study clarifies the limitations of the “State-Society” paradigm regarding the development of environmental governance and NGOs in China during the social transformation period and addresses them by introducing the new “Institutions-Life” paradigm. The study focuses on the activities of environmental NGOs in “China” while showing the limitations of the existing environmental NGO development model established on the premise of the transition to a modern capitalist civic society. Hence, it clarifies institutional reforms that have not taken the conventional route of influencing policy-making by resisting the government and draws a new human and social vision of the private society of “China.”

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 organizes previous research based on the “State-Society” paradigm and captures the limitations of this analytical perspective. Section 3 verifies the adaptability of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm by considering the development history of environmental governance and environmental NGOs in China after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy and examines whether the social transformation period has affected it in a general sense. Subsequently, Section 4 discusses specific applications of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm, proposes a specific analytical framework for the action strategies of environmental NGOs toward establishing environmental governance in China, and summarizes the study findings.

2. Previous Research Based on the “State-Society” Paradigm and its Limitations

The “state” and “society” based on the “State-Society” paradigm are considered two entities in prior studies, one of internal identity and the other of external independence and autonomy, positioned in an oppositional binary structure. In other words, the relationship between the state and society in the “State-Society” paradigm is built on the assumption of the attributes of division and conflict, and its interest focuses on the development of a “social domain not confused with or invaded by the state.” Thus, the emergence and activities of NGOs are the actors of civic society, and defending the boundary between civic society and the state is said to promote the democratic process, counter daily-expanding bureaucratic institutions, and prevent aggression from the state (Li 2018). There is the environmental governance concept of “a process that integrates governance from the top (government) and autonomy from the bottom (civic society) and positively participates in solving problems while utilizing the diversity and pluralism from the actors involved toward the construction of a sustainable society” (Matsushita & Ohno 2007: 4). The underlying premise is the emergence of a “public sphere” in China, where environmental governance and environmental NGOs diverge from the conventional environmental government. Instead, they adopt an approach that fosters an autonomous and equitable power relationship between the government and environmental NGOs, enabling both parties to achieve consensus through communication.

This study conducts a comprehensive review of previous research on environmental NGOs and environmental governance, revealing two distinct research perspectives contingent on whether the driving force of social transformation is attributed to the “state” or “society.” The first perspective (i.e., the “top-down perspective”) revolves around the development of China’s state-society relationship through the “political conquest of society” by the “party = state” system (Hishida 2000). Within this perspective, the involvement of environmental NGOs in environmental governance is influenced by factors such as political opportunities (advantageous political conditions resulting from institutional reform) and available resources (including personnel, goods, and finances) (Zhan & Tang 2013). Nonetheless, prior studies often adopt a negative stance, characterizing the relationship as a “strong government and weak society” (e.g., Koga 2010; Otsuka 2019). The second perspective (the “bottom-up perspective”) emphasizes the proactive role of the private sector, represented by environmental NGOs. This perspective highlights how individuals were liberated from the institutional constraints of the planned economy period, leading environmental NGOs to become catalysts for “introducing new social norms and social relationships” (Wang 2013). Notably, Yanyan Li (2018) demonstrates a strong belief and positive outlook toward the development of environmental NGOs and environmental governance.

2.1. Top-down Perspective: Negative attitude of “strong government, weak society”

The top-down perspective is frequently adopted in environmental policy studies, centering on policy formulation and the enforcement of environmental governance. It involves a discussion of the participation of environmental NGOs and the development of collaborative relationships with governments as follows.

First, regarding policy formulation, Ye (2018) asserted that environmental NGOs in China exhibit limited viability, given strict government oversight. Their registration and participation are typically granted as concessions from the government, and Ye (2018) advocated for independent institutional reforms to alter this situation. Further, the existing institution encompasses two facets of government influence: supportive and restrictive. Legal limitations, exemplified by the enactment of the Overseas NGO Domestic Activity Management Act in 2016, also contribute to the complexities faced by environmental NGOs. Environmental NGOs have historically relied on financial backing from international NGOs, inducing a recent decline in their numbers and activities.

Moreover, in the policy enforcement context, significant attention has been drawn to influential environmental NGOs operating in large cities and local environmental NGOs. Koga (2010) examined influential environmental NGOs in Beijing, shedding light on their role in environmental governance. For instance, the 2003 Nu River dam campaign is a pioneering example, where environmental NGO federations like Friends of Nature and Global Village collaborated with the Ministry of Environmental Protection, domestic media, and overseas NGOs to disseminate information. Thus, their efforts indirectly influenced the decision-making process of the central government. However, within the “party = state” system, influential NGOs are limited, making it challenging to overgeneralize the impact

of such cases. Furthermore, most environmental governance cases currently hinge on the government's intentions (Koga 2010: 186).

Additionally, Otsuka (2019: 155–170) focused on the local environmental NGO called “Guardians of the Huai River” and their efforts in providing damage relief in a “cancer village.” The study found that the interaction between the “Guardians of the Huai River,” local governments, and the media resulted in the formation of a “semi-public sphere.” However, this space is not akin to the unrestricted public sphere commonly perceived in the West; instead, it can be described as a “suppressed public sphere.” For instance, Otsuka (2019) highlights that the collaborative relationship between the NGO and the government was not effectively established when addressing health hazards and improving drinking water sources. Aikawa (2012: 138) details the attitudes of local governments toward environmental NGOs. In the context of China’s environmental governance, it is evident that environmental NGOs are not always viewed favorably by local governments. In some cases, their activities are restricted or obstructed by government interference, hindering their independence and autonomy. This situation further complicates the establishment of a collaborative relationship between NGOs and the government, which is crucial for environmental governance.

2.2. Bottom-up Perspective: Positive attitude toward improving the autonomy of civic society

The bottom-up perspective, which focuses on the private driving force, examines the distinctive action strategies employed by environmental NGOs and views civic society as active, even given government interference and supervision.

Yanyan Li (2018) criticized the “transformation of Chinese society,” which has predominantly followed a top-down approach closely aligned with party policies, for neglecting the significance of the private sector’s influence. Therefore, the author emphasized the importance of considering privately-initiated NGOs “from the bottom-up” and analyzed them through the lens of a normative civic society theory rooted in the pursuit of democratization. Li (2018) sheds light on the challenges of identifying prospects for Chinese civic society in the present-day context while asserting that it should manifest as a “process in which ordinary people envision and strive for the kind of society they desire, take concrete actions to approach that vision, and express their values” (Li 2018: 81). In her analysis, Li (2018) extensively examines the internal generation process of environmental NGOs, delving into the theoretical structure and formation process of Chinese civic society from multiple angles. She employs a three-fold framework for analysis, comprising (1) connections between interests and actions in the public sphere, (2) voluntary organizations, and (3) organizational autonomy.

Furthermore, Li (2018) took up environmental NGOs as typical representatives of civic society, with a particular focus on youths born after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy. These highly educated and specialized youths have begun to take the initiative to tackle environmental problems, and an institutional environment (laws, resources, intermediate support organizations) to support young groups is gradually being established. In other words, it goes far beyond the non-institutional route (government dependence) of the first generation of environmental NGOs and continues to influence the government’s

attitude with its power. Many researchers who take such a bottom-up perspective indicate a change in the governance structure of the “strong state, weak society” and that the civic society’s capacity for autonomy and awareness of rights is increasing.

2.3. Theoretical Limitations of the “State-Society” Paradigm and New Emerging Issues

Prior studies on the “State-Society” paradigm highlighted two perspectives for explaining the establishment of environmental governance and the occurrence of actions by environmental NGOs. However, the structural elements that stipulate the actions of NGOs (or institutions) and the subjective elements of NGOs (or subjectivity) are in conflict. The following is a clarification of the limitations of the “State-Society” paradigm while considering the root cause of the conflict.

As noted, the “State-Society” paradigm operates under the assumption that civic society and the state are inherently conflicting structures. Therefore, this paradigm focuses on the structural relationship between the state (government) and society (environmental NGOs) as independent entities with their respective areas of activity and separation, each with distinct rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, Huang (1994: 216) noted that the duality theory threatens to trivialize the problem and treat complex social problems as “we run the risk of reducing the debate here to little more than an argument over whose influence was greater in the phenomena under discussion, society’s or the state’s.” Therefore, researchers become preoccupied with determining the stronger and weaker ones. Nonetheless, beyond the theory of the “State-Society” paradigm, the clash of arguments also stems from the “100-year war over sociological methodology” (Nabe 2018) that has been described as methodological collectivism and methodological individualism, structure, and action.

The top-down perspective states that government power significantly limits the conditions under which environmental NGOs can conduct activities, and the solution lies in the conversion of the government into a democratic system. However, as the state’s enormous control remains, there is no present-day solution, which clearly induces a negative attitude. Meanwhile, the bottom-up perspective views state institutions that regulate the actions of environmental NGOs only as tools and assumes that people bound by their circumstances have the initiative for breaking the rules. Li (2018) redefines Western civic society theory and addresses the growth of Chinese civic society. Nevertheless, the discussion positions environmental NGOs as interlocutors of the state rather than as pursuing independent development; thus, it seems the NGOs have not overcome the static antinomic structure.

Certainly, efforts to address the limitations of the “State-Society” paradigm also encompass alternative approaches that center on the interactions between environmental NGOs and the government. These dynamic practices are often explored through the lens of informal institutions. One of the applications is borrowing government resources and authority. Teets (2017) noted that environmental NGOs in China have achieved success in policy advocacy. However, it is essential to recognize that this success does not necessarily imply that they follow the same trajectory as Western NGOs that aim to create social movements and pressurize governments to influence formal institutions. China’s route is to conduct policy advocacy using (1) government-affiliated organizations or (2) close personal

relationships between environmental NGO leaders and government officials. Another example is actively engaging in exchanges and “bargaining” with the government. Cao and Wang (2018) indicated that cooperative relationships with governments formed through routes such as environmental NGOs having relationships with the government or having private relationships with government officials are unstable and unpredictable. They discussed how to build sustainable cooperative relationships with local governments through routes other than private relationships. Moreover, they consider the example of a local private NGO called “Green Hunan,” analyzing that the NGO built environmental governance through the methods of “making a scene” and “bringing others around.” First, the NGO “made a scene” on the Internet to expose the pollution problem and, with the help of public opinion, broke through the deadlock and achieved dialogue with the government. Unlike Western social movements, which continue to oppose the government as a pressure group until the problem is solved, the NGO actively introduced solutions while allowing the government to save face and urged them to solve the environmental problems together, “bringing others around.”

The noted studies break away from the static duality structure and analyze the reality of the practice between the government and society. Nevertheless, losing sight of the direction of reconstructing the relationship between the Chinese government and society cannot be ruled out to merely explain the strategies of environmental NGOs that aim for environmental governance. In other words, if it is not applied to the democratic civic society theory—the normative theory of the “State-Society” paradigm—we encounter the challenge of losing the reference axis for correctly judging the relationship between existing governments and environmental NGOs.

Youmei Li et al. (2018), who discussed “Chinese transformation sociology,” focused on the challenges, investigated what kind of internal logic exists in the reconstruction of the relationship between the state and society in the social transformation period, and proposed a “three-stage theory” of social governance transformation. This theory is expected to provide a logical basis for forming the “Institutions-Life” paradigm. Therefore, the next section references the “three-stage theory” while probing for a unique transformation model for environmental governance and environmental NGOs and presenting the direction to reconstruct the state and society during the social transformation period.

3. Logic of a Unique Transformation Model from the Development History of Environmental Governance and Environmental NGOs

3.1. Unique Model of Governance and Society Formation in the Social Transformation Period

As highlighted earlier, the examination of the relationship between the state and society following the Reform and Opening-Up Policy has primarily centered on internal changes. However, considering this period a social transformation period suggests that internal structures could undergo changes, potentially influenced by domestic factors within China and external factors on a global scale (Li et al. 2005).

Youmei Li et al. (2018: 23) considered these aspects and proposed a new transformation model

that confirms marketization, globalization, and informatization as the external driving forces that promote China's social transformation. Moreover, these driving forces present the problems and conditions for governance and society formation during the social transformation period.

(1) From 1978, when the Reform and Opening-Up Policy started, the introduction of marketization and associated reforms of economic institutions induced a shift from a planned economy to a market economy.

(2) China's joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 was a declaration that it would act per the principles of global markets, and its economic system has strengthened its close connections with global markets. Under the influence of external norms, China experienced continuous changes in its social structure, organizations, and institutions.

(3) After 2012, the development of new technologies, such as the Internet, led to the construction of social order and rapid changes in lifestyles, significantly changing traditional ways of thinking and promoting the development of a post-industrial society.

This “three-stage theory” avoids excessive emphasis on internal factors, such as the conventional regulation of state institutions and the activeness of individuals, while focusing on the interactions between the state and society during the Chinese social transformation period and presenting new factors.

Furthermore, by applying the “three-stage theory” to the development history of environmental governance institutions and environmental NGOs, the history can be divided into three stages: (1) Marketization (1978–2000): the institutionalization of environmental protection and establishment of NGOs; (2) Globalization (2001–2011): the introduction of environmental governance and networking of environmental NGOs; (3) Informatization (2012–present): the systematization of NGOs and “environmental governance”. Accordingly, the next section discusses what kind of social problems and growth conditions for NGOs have been effected by the driving force of the social transformation period in each stage and how environmental governance and environmental NGOs have responded to these problems. Subsequently, the findings are used as a basis for probing the logic of this transformation model.

3.2. Marketization (1978–2000): Institutionalization of environmental protection and establishment of environmental NGOs

After the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, the policy focus shifted from the “use of class struggle as the essential element” (henceforth “class struggle policy”) to “economic construction” (henceforth “economic construction focus”), and a market economy system was introduced. However, environmental problems also rapidly became more serious with rapid social transformation.²⁾ Meanwhile, the economic foundation for environmental NGOs was steadily being built through the expansion of the market space and resources (Yu 2002: 3).

3.2.1. Institutionalization of Environmental Protection: Basic national environmental protection policy

and sustainable development strategy

The “order-style” planned economy system was institutionalized to address the increasingly serious environmental problems. The government mainly focused on developing the infrastructure for the institutionalization of environmental protection toward the treatment of the “three wastes” (industrial pollution wastewater, waste gas, and solid waste) and comprehensive utilization of resources. In 1979, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Environmental Protection Law (trial), which was China’s first environmental law, was promulgated, and the first form of environmental protection since the founding of China reached the path toward the rule of law.

In 1992, China established the goal of creating a market economy system through overall reforms toward marketization. In the same year, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development adopted environmental treaties such as “Agenda 21” and proposed a strategy for “sustainable development.” The Chinese government signed the treaty in 1994 and explicitly incorporated “sustainable development” as a national strategy in their “Ninth Five-Year Plan on National Economy and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives toward 2010³⁾ The “sustainable development” strategy recognized that environmental problems were becoming contradictory and challenging amid national development, as it was viewed as a national development strategy encompassing all aspects of economic construction, ecosystem conservation, and pollution prevention and response (Lin 2012). However, despite the institutionalization of environmental protection, the government’s powerlessness was exposed, and its efforts were constrained, given a long-lasting fiscal deficit from the flow of planned system resources into the market. Additionally, in the private sector, victimized farmers united and rebelled against local governments and companies, resulting in violent incidents. These circumstances provided opportunities for the government to collaborate with the private sector to address environmental issues.

3.2.2. Establishment of Environmental NGOs and Dissemination of Environmental Education

The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party⁴⁾ was held at the end of 1978, marking the beginning of economic and political system reforms. They included the implementation of “decentralization of power and transfer of profits” or reforms where the government delegated authority to the market and society. In the grassroots society, the policy of separating political and economic functions was implemented. However, after the political events of 1989, the government focused on cracking down on private associations, and the formal registration of NGOs was under the management of a dual-administration institution that requires approval from the Ministry of Civil Affairs and administrative agencies (Environmental Protection Bureau for environmental protection). Additionally, most environmental NGOs generally stalled at the operating agency permit application stage, given government departmental attempts to avoid responsibilities and risks (Lu 2000).

The first generation of NGOs was founded in the mid-1990s and operated without legal status. Nevertheless, glimpses of the unique tactics of the NGOs can be seen here, which generally manifested

in the two aspects of registration of corporate qualifications and the scope of activities. First, for corporate registration, as can be seen by “Gua kao” (affiliate), the NGOs may register as branches of government-organized NGOs or obtain verbal assurances of legal status through private relationships with government officials. For example, “Friends of Nature” was founded as a branch of the Chinese Culture Academy (government-affiliated organization), to which the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Congjje Liang belonged. Additionally, in 1996, “Green Earth Volunteers” was founded by China Central Television journalist, Yongchen Wang, and Chinese environmental science researcher Jiaman Jin. While unregistered (registered in 2008), they invited the director of the Ministry of Environmental Protection at the time, journalists, and scientists for activities. Most environmental NGO leaders during this period were intellectuals with symbolism and charisma (Li 2018: 59), were aware of the social problems after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, and had a prominent sense of responsibility as citizens.

Additionally, within the scope of NGO activities, they refrained from excessive action, stating that they would “fulfill their roles in the directions that the government wishes,” and held environmental conservation events centered on environmental education for the general public while avoiding the sensitive subject of environmental disputes. They could not exert full-scale efforts regarding how to engage with environmental pollution control (Aikawa 2020).

3.3. Globalization (2001–2011): Introduction of “environmental governance” and networking of NGOs

China developed its economic system by focusing on secondary industries as the “world’s factory” driven by labor-intensive and foreign demand-driven industries while integrating its economic system with the global market by progressively developing marketization and joining the WTO in 2001. However, this miraculous breakthrough also induced environmental problems, leading to several pollution incidents, especially since the 2000s. Numerous companies were responsible for leaking and releasing various chemical substances, resulting in widespread pollution. For instance, the Sichuan River water pollution incident in 2004 involving a chemical company⁵⁾ and the Songhua River pollution incident in 2005 caused by a petrochemical plant⁶⁾ had significant societal impacts, making environmental problems a matter of national concern.

Meanwhile, an emergent condition from the progress of globalization for the growth of NGOs was the permeation of Western market principles and the spread of market-related liberal administration and social integration concepts (Li 2018: 25). The following sections deepen the discussion of the logic and conditions stemming from globalization to this stage of government structural reforms and growth of NGOs from two aspects: “scientific control of environmental pollutants and construction of institutional environment for public participation” and “expansion and networking of environmental NGOs.”

3.3.1. Scientific Control of Environmental Pollutants and Construction of Institutional Environment for Public Participation

The widespread expansion of environmental problems and the energy crisis during this period

sparked considerations for constructing an environmentally friendly society, emphasizing “energy conservation and emissions reductions” and introducing “environmental governance” as an institution for public participation. Following its entry into the WTO, the government recognized the necessity for structural reforms to align with global standards. Consequently, it began pursuing the adoption of the new public management paradigm, incorporating diverse actors and social organizations, with the underlying implication of promoting the development of NGOs (NGO Research Center 2006: 23). Another critical factor contributing to this shift is China’s engagement with the international community to enhance its international status, as the Chinese government signed an international treaty on civil and political rights. Notably, the presence of NGOs holds symbolic significance in empowering the public, inducing the government to relax its previous strict restrictions and attitudes to some extent (Zhao 2004). For instance, in 2008, the government actively collaborated with environmental NGOs to conduct “green activities” during the Beijing Olympics.

Additionally, institutions were established in which residents and NGOs participate in the policy formulation and provision of public services. In 2004, the “Provisional Measures for Environmental Protection Administrative Licensing Hearings” came into effect, and a public hearing institution was introduced in the environmental field. Furthermore, in the same year, the proposal of a social management system introduced the concept of “party committee takes the lead, the government takes responsibility, society as a whole cooperates, and the public participates.” This introduction marked a departure from the traditional system of total government control, aiming to involve the general public and environmental NGOs actively. Notably, during this period, policies were issued with a focus on environmental NGOs. In the “Guiding Opinions on Fostering and Introducing the Rational Development of Social Organizations”⁷⁾ (2010), the role of environmental NGOs was highlighted as a “bridge and tie between the government, businesses, and citizens.”

3.3.2. Expansion of Environmental NGOs and Networking Activities

The power of the private sector awakened with the international rise of the association revolution that began in the 1980s and the impact of the Great Sichuan Earthquake. Moreover, the number of environmental NGOs continued to increase. For example, after retirement, the former Ministry of Environmental Protection director, Qu Geping, invited influential people from within the government and society to work on establishing the All-China Environment Federation (ACEF), which is the construction of a platform for exchange and collaboration between the government and private environmental NGOs. Further, “Alashan SEE Ecology Association” was established by companies and social entrepreneurs in 2004, and the Alashan SEE Foundation was established in 2008 and is currently active as an intermediary support organization for environmental NGOs.

Recent years have seen many cases of environmental NGOs influencing the government’s environmental policies. These NGOs have engaged in networking to promote the disclosure and resolution of serious pollution incidents and have encouraged environmental institutions and citizens to raise their awareness of environmental protection. For example, in 2004, in response to the Nu River

dam construction promoted by the National Development and Reform Commission, the environmental NGOs “Green Watershed,” “Green Earth Volunteers,” and “Friends of Nature” formed a network and developed an environmental protection movement. Consequently, a plan for a national project was temporally shelved. Since 2008, as environmental information disclosure became institutionalized⁸⁾, there has been a rise in the green supply chain movement, which has centered on the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE). This movement is an effort to pursue supply chain links from polluting companies and pursue responsibility for pollution to upstream producers and downstream manufacturers (Chiashi 2015: 180). According to the interview surveys⁹⁾, IPE used the noted efforts as a basis for deepening cooperation by requesting local surveys and sharing information through a network of environmental NGOs in various parts of China (Green Choice Alliance).

Specialized organizations have also been established and are conducting activities in more regions beyond the noted central areas, such as Beijing. For example, “Guardians of the Huai River” in Henan Province and Green Anhui in Anhui Province can now file complaints from the damage site and support victims (collecting evidence and instructing them on legal behavior) (Aikawa 2012: 137).

3.4. Informatization (2012–present): Systematization of environmental NGOs and “environmental governance”

Since 2010, the widespread adoption of information technology, particularly the Internet, has been a significant avenue for public input and collective action to influence public policy. Further, the advancement of communication technology has fostered a polycentric cyberspace devoid of state control (Huang 2010). Nevertheless, alongside China’s rapid social transformation are challenges such as social fragmentation, a restructuring of the traditional state and society relationship, and associated risks and uncertainties (Li 2018: 57).

During this period, the rapid depletion of ecological resources¹⁰⁾ and the escalating levels of pollutants have exacerbated environmental issues and heightened the occurrence of natural disasters (Lin 2012). In 2009, the U.S. Embassy in China published PM2.5 figures on Twitter, which sparked nationwide discussions and highlighted issues concerning China’s interference in its internal affairs. In 2015, the documentary, “Under the Dome”, directed by former China Central Television journalist Chai Jing, gained massive popularity online and raised awareness about the declining quality of daily life and the significance of environmental protection among Chinese people. The discussion presented here encompasses two aspects: “construction of ecological civilization governance by pluralistic actors” and “participation of youth and environmental public interest litigation.”

3.4.1. Construction of ecological civilization governance by pluralistic stakeholders

At the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in 2012, the “construction of ecological civilization” was given unprecedented emphasis. In 2015, a strict Environmental Protection Law (amendment) was passed such that it was said to “have teeth.” Under this new environmental law, NGOs were positioned as actors that could bring cases to the Supreme People’s Court. In other words,

the fact that environmental NGOs, who were not direct victims, were given the right to participate in and monitor environmental protection was considered to be a major change in environmental governance. Further, environmental information disclosure institutions in the form of the “Government Information Disclosure Regulations” (2019) and “Administrative Measures for the Legal Disclosure of Enterprise Environmental Information” (2021)¹¹⁾ have laid the foundation for environmental NGOs and citizen participation. Moreover, the 2017 “Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Guidance and Regulatory Management for Environmental Protection Society Organizations”¹²⁾ noted that providing legal guidance and support to environmental NGOs was to be a basic principle. Additionally, measures such as direct registration, government purchasing NGO items, training professional capacity, and guidance on environmental public interest litigation could be considered in response to conventional problems such as “registration difficulties” (double registration institution of civil affairs departments and business departments) and “financial difficulties.” Furthermore, the 2020 “Guiding Opinions on Building a Modern Environmental Governance System”¹³⁾ stipulated elements such as goals, construction paths, and participation routes. Its promulgation suggested that the construction of an environmental governance system was entering a new stage.

3.4.2. Participation of the Youth and Environmental Public Interest Litigation

During this period, with the proliferation of individual media and the establishment of intermediary support organizations, the younger generation born in the 80s and 90s gradually brought new energy and enthusiasm to the development of environmental NGOs (Yanyan Li 2018: 62). The Internet’s widespread reach empowered the youth to act independently, enabling them to use social media as a platform to voice their opinions and engage with and mobilize diverse social groups, forming a system that could rival traditional structures (Huang 2010). A notable characteristic is the emergence of youth-centered groups engaging in various practical activities, such as using social media to share pollution photos and blogs and reporting monitoring and assessment findings to relevant environmental authorities. For instance, in 2010, the youth group “Tianjin Binhai Environmental Advisory Service Center.” assembled on the social media platform Weibo and conducted field surveys based on pollution information provided by Internet users, where they collaborated with local environmental departments to address numerous environmental issues¹⁴⁾.

Simultaneously, one reform in the institutional environment allowed for the possibility of environmental public interest litigation to be initiated by environmental NGOs. As per the “Environment and Resources Adjudication of China” (2016 & 2020 editions)¹⁵⁾, only nine lawsuits were filed by environmental and social organizations (including government-oriented NGOs) in 2015, but the number increased to 103 in 2020. Notably, many plaintiffs in these cases were influential environmental NGOs equipped with financial resources and legal representation, such as the government-affiliate ACEF and China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation and the grassroots organizations “Friends of Nature” and the CLAPV. Moreover, recently, other influential NGOs beyond those mentioned have been actively organizing legal capacity training seminars and providing financial

support to youth groups.

3.5. Unique Transformation Model from the Development History of Environmental Governance and Environmental NGOs

This section discusses the unique transformation model of environmental governance and environmental NGOs after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, based on the three-stage development in China. Although environmental governance and environmental NGOs in China have been forced to respond to several social problems from the transformation of society, its development and practice could be re-interpreted as the product of rational responses to these problems. The following is a discussion of how the state (government) and society (environmental NGOs) responded to these problems.

As noted, marketization and globalization progressed rapidly after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy; along with compressed modernization, there was this same “compressibility” of China’s environmental problems (Li 2000). The government formed a rational awareness while dealing with the current conditions of the environmental problems it faces. However, while establishing official institutions to address those problems, the limitations of the government have become apparent. Therefore, market-related liberal administration and social integration concepts were introduced from overseas, and the increased public awareness of environmental problems somewhat gave rationality to the existence and activities of environmental NGOs. Particularly since the 1990s, the number of environmental NGOs and their expertise, including their ability to communicate with the government have increased considerably. There has been a transition to environmental governance that approves environmental NGOs as actors and invites the participation of diverse actors. Nevertheless, the formal institution adheres to “government-led environmental governance,” where “the party committee provides guidance and the government leads.”

Concurrently, the severity of compressed environmental problems, as mentioned earlier, provided favorable conditions for the growth of environmental NGOs. The expansion of market space and resources, the influence of the international association revolution, and the widespread use of the Internet further supported and enhanced the development of environmental NGOs, providing them with the necessary physical and technical backing and creating a new activity space. During their initial emergence in China, environmental NGOs looked to foreign organizations for guidance on forms and methods of activities to manage and develop themselves. However, given the formidable presence of government power in China, environmental NGOs made a conscious effort to establish themselves as supporters rather than adversaries of the government. Their activity methods were more moderate relative to those of social movements, and they often aligned themselves with the directions set by national environmental institutions or utilized personal connections with the government. These informal practices allowed environmental NGOs to gain legitimacy and contributed to promoting reforms in formal institutions governing environmental NGOs. For instance, in recent years, the conventional dual registration system has been improved to introduce the direct registration system,

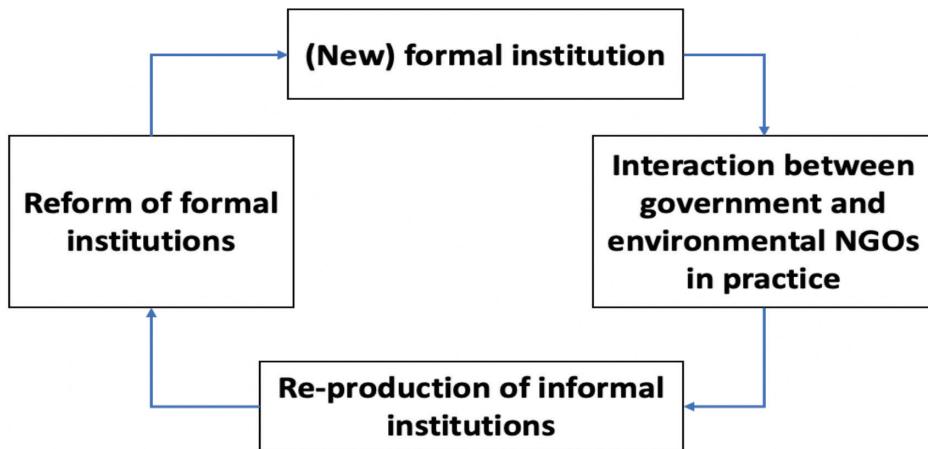


FIGURE 1.

Unique transformation model of environmental governance and environmental NGOs in the social transformation period (created by author)

yielding a more systematic approach to environmental governance.

From the discussion, the study devised the logic of a unique transformation model based on the development history of environmental governance and environmental NGOs after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy (Figure 1). From the figure, it is challenging for huge government power to respond rationally to social problems and conditions created by external driving forces, although such changes are linked to giving social beings (environmental NGOs) a space to survive and develop. In other words, while formal institutions are being implemented, the interaction between their proxy (government) and social beings (environmental NGOs) induces the reproduction of informal institutions. Meanwhile, environmental NGOs can produce specific results based on their specialized abilities, which indirectly promotes the reform of formal institutions.

By following this transformation model, this study deviates from the conventional “State-Society” paradigm, where social movements exert pressure on those in power to influence decision-making. Instead, the unique transformation model of China’s social transformation period suggests that the reproduction of informal institutions occurs through the interaction between the government (with power), which seeks structural regulation, and environmental NGOs (powerless). Subsequently, this situation leads to reforms in formal institutions. Regarding the methodology, as mentioned in Section 2, there exists the potential for collaboration between the two entities beyond the conventional duality between structures that dictate actors’ actions and actions that challenge these stipulations. Indeed, while acknowledging the significant structural constraints imposed by the state, alternative routes beyond social movements, as proposed by the “State-Society” paradigm, are also considered. They include the informal pathway of practice, characterized by the interaction between environmental NGOs and the government. These aspects form the logical foundation for the “Institutions-Life”

paradigm.

4. Application of the “Institutions-Life” Paradigm in Environmental Governance and Environmental NGOs in the Social Transformation Period

The authors express further concern about facilitating collaborative relationships between environmental NGOs, the government, and industrial sector actors to establish effective environmental governance. However, relating this aspect to the issue of collaborative relationships in this study necessitates an explanation of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm and the resolution of two other problems. The first problem involves selecting survey methods that can capture the microscale behaviors of environmental NGOs. The second problem entails presenting a specific analytical framework to determine microscale behaviors. The situation stems from the fact that the “Institutions-Life” paradigm is considered a middle-range theory¹⁶⁾ elucidating the driving force behind the institutionalization of environmental governance and the growth of environmental NGOs during the social transformation period. Nevertheless, the resolution attempt fails to clarify the micro-mechanisms and logic that underpin these processes (Xiao 2014). Thus, it is imperative to identify a research method and an analytical framework that can observe the interaction between environmental NGOs and others while considering specific practices. Therefore, the discussion proceeds with specific applications of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm. First, the study introduces the paradigm’s contents, emphasizing its superiority over the “State-Society” paradigm. Next, the study clarifies the effectiveness of “life history” as a microscale research method applied to the “Institutions-Life” paradigm. Finally, an analytical framework is introduced to extract action strategies aimed at fostering collaborative relationships between environmental NGOs and other sectors.

4.1. *Contents and Superiority of the “Institutions-Life” Paradigm*

As previously mentioned, sociologists Youmei Li (2008) and Ying Xiao (2014) from Shanghai University developed the “Institutions-Life” paradigm as an alternative to the “State-Society” paradigm. This paradigm focuses on understanding the mechanism of power reproduction among powerless actors. In this context, the term “institution” refers to formal institutions established by the state to support the functioning of government agencies at different levels. However, “life”¹⁷⁾ encompasses informal institutions, which include interests, powers, claims, life strategies, techniques, and relatively stable popular habits (mores). Further, as described in Section 3, the “Institutions-Life” paradigm replaces the “State-Society” relationship with the relationship between formal and informal institutions. Its construction and application are conducted by observing the interaction of the proxies of formal institutions (government) and social beings (environmental NGOs). Moreover, the reproduction of informal institutions promotes the reform of formal institutions, blurring the boundaries between the state and society while depicting the reality of the interaction between the government and environmental NGOs during the social transformation period.

The concern of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm differs from the power relationships in the “State-Society” paradigm. In other words, whereas the “State-Society” paradigm assumes the symmetry of the power relationship between the state and society, the “Institutions-Life” paradigm assumes the asymmetry and inequality of the power relationship between the two. Thus, as a concept that corresponds to the authoritarian system, it reflects the current circumstances of the massive government power and the powerless environmental NGOs during the social transformation period.

Finally, such means of power reproduction among the ruled recognize the effectiveness of informal institutions. Thus far, with the “State-Society” paradigm, little emphasis has been given to informal institutions (such as social networks). Arguably, the situation stems from the fact that informal institutions are limited to specific personal relationships in the authoritarian “party = state” system (Koga 2010: 112). However, Xiao (2014) indicated the cultural factors behind informal institutions—Xiaotong Fei’s “differential mode of association” of traditional Chinese structures. This “differential mode of association”¹⁸⁾ forms the basis of the construction and application of traditional Chinese social networks and corresponds to “popular sentiment” in traditional Chinese culture. In other words, as with the saying, “the ruler is the ruler, the minister is the minister, the father is the father, and the son is the son”, “differential mode of association” is theoretically based on the status system class order of “propriety.”¹⁹⁾ Nevertheless, in the informal practice of the social transformation period, it emerges as a flexible social network based on “emotion.” Additionally, regarding its role, Shuming Liang (1949) indicated that the utilization of informal institutions called social networks enabled the acquisition of resources that cannot be obtained through general routes of formal institutions. In short, this mode is a convenient means of resource allocation that differs from the state and market (Li 1994). Therefore, the role of the “differential mode of association” in the informal practice of the government and environmental NGOs blurs the boundaries between private relationships and public interests and between formal institutions and common law, successfully creating a pluralistic emotional and moral community.

Furthermore, specific action policies by environmental NGOs are addressed, deepening our understanding of the application of informal institutions. Zhao (2004) suggested the following four routes: (1) invite government and party officials to serve in honorary posts or advisory groups or invite them to ceremonies and events to legalize the organization effectively; (2) use personal connections to understand and cooperate with government officials and utilize the government’s authority and resources to achieve organizational objectives; (3) build relationships with government officials and enter the government system to expand the scope of activities; (4) use personal connections to convey requests and proposals to government officials and strive to influence policy formation. The application of informal institutions is expected to play a significant role in building collaborative relationships in environmental governance in the future.

In summary, the “Institutions-Life” paradigm can be argued to be a more dynamic framework for analyzing the interaction between the government and environmental NGOs during the social transformation period than the “State-Society” paradigm. The effectiveness of informal institutions

(e.g., social networks) is also considered.

4.2. Correspondence Between the “Institutions-Life” Paradigm and the “Life history” Survey Method

This section examines the selection of survey methods for how to determine the microscale behavior of environmental NGOs in introducing the “Institutions-Life” paradigm. The important element in this examination is how to reconstruct history.

“Life history” can address this element. Arisue (2012), in his book *Declaration of Life History: Sociology of Life History*, discussed in detail the methodological challenges and possibilities of life history, which can provide major suggestions for this study. Life history is considered “essentially a description of an individual’s life in a social context” (Arisue 2012: 6). Various directions are being explored in the application of life history beyond the collection of life history examples, such as qualitative survey methods and survey practices, research methodology related to the ethical issues of surveys, or contact points with psychoanalysis and phenomenology related to the individual’s “identity” and “everyday consciousness.” In particular, the perspective of social change theory is considered to be consistent with the purpose of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm—it reflects a “position to reconsider how individuals are associated with social change from the aspect of life history facts” (Arisue 2012: 57). In the context of the actual circumstances in China, the theory is expected to furnish the ability to trace the past interactions of the people in environmental NGOs who promoted the reform of formal institutions since the Reform and Opening-Up Policy and trace the trajectory of the reproduction of power of the ruled from the important events and experiences of individuals under the institution of enormous government power.

4.3. Application of the “Institutions-Life” Paradigm: Formation of collaborative relationships for environmental governance by environmental NGOs

This section establishes an analytical perspective to empirically identify the conditions for environmental NGOs to collaborate with other sectors. A prior study argued that environmental NGOs, as third parties, act as lubricating agents, coordinating the power of multiple actors (Leng & Miyoshi 2022). As noted in Section 2, local governments and corporations hinder the efforts of environmental NGOs in constructing environmental governance. Consequently, establishing collaborative relationships, for which environmental governance aims, is akin to the reproduction of the power of environmental NGOs. Therefore, we examine the analytical framework based on the three dimensions of power reproduction by Xiao (2014).

The first dimension involves how environmental NGOs can create “sympathy,” rationality, and legal status to start. In modern society, legal status is considered crucial for the functioning of environmental NGOs. However, in China’s cultural context, where the tradition of the rule of law is relatively weak, legal status often remains abstract. Instead, being sensible (“sympathy,” rationality) can generally be more effective in winning people’s hearts and being persuasive. For instance, the first generation of environmental NGOs, despite lacking legal status, had a chance to survive given the

experience of foreign environmental NGOs and the pressing demands of local environmental issues.

Next, for the second dimension, environmental NGOs devised strategies and tactics, mobilized various social resources, and created collaborative relationships to see what kinds of effect these had on the progress of the incident. In general, they emphasized collaborations with mass media, experts, and local residents and formed a social network. Other examples included a means of dividing forces within the government. Moreover, given the centralized system and influence of “rule by virtue and courtesy,” environmental NGOs cooperated with the central government and urged local governments to solve problems based on the idea that “all central government officials are clean and honest”.

Finally, for the third dimension, environmental NGOs should judge whether they are sustainably motivated to solve environmental problems from the effects of forming those collaborative relationships. Achieving the formation of collaborative relationships for environmental governance in the social transformation period in accordance with these three dimensions requires the extraction of action strategies of environmental NGOs, which gives scope for future studies.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the transformation of the analytical framework of environmental NGOs and environmental governance during the social transformation period in China. The “State-Society” paradigm formed from the history of Western nations provided important suggestions for the development of early environmental NGOs. However, from the prior studies reviewed in Section 2, there was insufficient analysis on the duality between structure and activity regarding methodology and the question, “Are there environmental NGOs that operate autonomously under the current situation of strong state power in China?” Thus, to overcome this situation, in Section 3, we summarized the development history of environmental NGOs and environmental governance after the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, referencing the “three-stage theory” related to the social transformation period. Accordingly, unlike the dualistic development method of the state and civic society in the conventional “State-Society” paradigm, we could confirm the logic of a unique transformation model during the social transformation period, where the government and environmental NGOs encourage the reform of formal institutions. Regarding methodology, the “Institutions-Life” paradigm, which goes beyond the duality between structure and action and integrates the two, could provide a theoretical basis for its formation. Finally, as an application of the “Institutions-Life” paradigm, we could present a dynamic framework for the interaction between environmental NGOs and governments for environmental governance while considering the current circumstances of state power and China’s unique cultural factors.

Future studies can consider exploring the life histories of individual environmental NGOs while using the analytical framework presented by the new paradigm. Additionally, the depiction of how collaborative relationships for environmental governance are created is worth discussing in future research.

Notes

- 1) As the “transformation” from a planned economy to a market economy is the most characteristic aspect of China’s development problems, “transformation sociology” was proposed in the 2000s as a field that questions social changes accompanying marketization and the ideal form of the market society. Additionally, just as there have been calls for “mainlandization” by applying the sociology originating in the West to China, there have progressively been more case study analyses that apply various theories to Chinese social transformation (Yu 2015: 40).
- 2) According to the “Survey of Industrial Sources of Pollution in Townships throughout China” (1997), “During the period of the 8th Five-Year Plan, the emissions of industrial pollutants in townships and villages will significantly increase, and major pollutants will account for a large percentage of the total amount of industrial pollutants in the country, which will not resolve environmental protection issues and will be factors that impact health.” Comparing 1995 with 1984, the “three wastes” (industrial pollution wastewater, waste gas, and solid waste) discharged by township and village enterprises increased from 0.58% to 21% for wastewater and from 11.84% to 88.7% for solid waste (Hong 1999).
- 3) The Chinese document is entitled “Ninth Five-Year Plan on National Economy and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives toward 2010,” from <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzllgh/gjfzgh/200709/P020191029595686994247.pdf> (last accessed September 10, 2022).
- 4) This refers to the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, held on December 18, 1978. This session was of major significance since the founding of the PRC, and it is said to have marked the beginning of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy.
- 5) In February 2004, pollutants from a chemical company flowed out into the Tuojiang River in Sichuan Province, causing water pollution that affected the lives of over one million residents.
- 6) In November 2005, an accident at a petrochemical plant in Jilin Province caused a large-scale water pollution incident called the Songhua River pollution incident. Zhenhua Xie, then the head of the State Environmental Protection Administration, took responsibility and resigned.
- 7) The Chinese document is entitled “Guiding Opinions on Fostering and Introducing the Rational Development of Social Organizations,” from https://www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bwj/201101/t20110128_200347.htm (last accessed September 10, 2022).
- 8) In 2007, IPE, together with the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims (CLAPV), proposed a policy on information disclosure, which was achieved as an institution in the following year (Aikawa 2020). According to the State Environmental Protection Administration’s “Measures for the Disclosure of Environmental Information” (2007). http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2007-04/20/content_589673.htm (last accessed September 10, 2022).
- 9) Online interviews with IPE workers were conducted on October 23, 2020.
- 10) Two-thirds of urban areas suffered from water shortages, and 1.8 billion mu. (one mu is approximately 6.667 acres), which is the minimum standard for arable land in rural areas, is disappearing (Lin 2012).

- 11) The Chinese document entitled, “Measures for the Disclosure of Environmental Information by Enterprises and Public Institutions,” from https://www.mee.gov.cn/xxgk/xxgk02/202112/t20211221_964837.html (last accessed September 11, 2022).
- 12) The Chinese document is entitled, “Guidance on Promoting Development and Regulating Management of Environmental Social Organizations,” from https://www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bwj/201703/t20170324_408754.htm (last accessed September 12, 2022).
- 13) The Chinese document is entitled, “Guidance on Building a Modern Environmental Governance System,” from http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-03/03/content_5486380.htm (last accessed September 12, 2022).
- 14) In late April 2022, the first author conducted an online interview with the former leader of “Tianjin Binhai Environmental Advisory Service Center.”
- 15) The Chinese document is entitled, “Chinese Environmental and Resource Adjudication,” from <http://wej.court.gov.cn/news/more-17.html> (last accessed September 12, 2022).
- 16) Middle-range theory begins with an empirical phenomenon rather than a broad, abstract entity such as social systems and abstracts it to create a general description verifiable by data.
- 17) Xiao (2014) emphasized the difference between “life” here and that of phenomenological sociology and Habermas’ “life world.” The “life world” emphasizes the institutionalization of “deliberative democracy,” where colonization by the system is overcome, and there is a reliance on the act of communication. According to Xiao, “life” emphasizes the existence of informal institutions in Chinese society, with representative examples being individual and group actors using various social resources such as power, money, human relationships, faces, connections, and networks to bargain for interests in ways other than institutions.
- 18) “Differential mode” refers to how “differences” (disparities) occur according to “mode” (order) in the same way that the “self” ranks others in concentric circles with different mental radii, with the height of the ripples gradually decreasing from the inside to the outside (Hanazawa 2010). In a local community with little mobility, this generally refers to blood ties and territorial ties to the local community.
- 19) “Propriety” is a norm. However, it is not an objective universal norm like a legal norm and is a subjective and special norm that stylizes emotions.

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