

A Study on the Action Strategies of ENGOs in China

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Abstract: With the involvement of environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and other third parties, China's environmental governance patterns have undergone profound changes, and environmental protection has gradually become a hot topic in Chinese society. This research is based on the question of why under the authoritarian governance structure in China, there are still ENGOs which choose to intervene in some competitive environmental movements. By utilizing the concept of field, this article explores the impact of rules, capital, and habitus in the environmental governance field on the participants like ENGOs and government agents based on the analysis of two typical cases. This study reveals the logic behind the action strategies of ENGOs, that is, to gain relative strength and dynamic balance between various sub-fields through the connection of social capital.

1. Introduction

Reform and Opening-up is a landmark for the development of China's environmental NGOs. Although China's economic and social construction has achieved rapid development, the ecological environment has also paid a very heavy price. At the same time, environmental issues are increasingly on the government's agendas, and the Chinese government has also made great efforts in environmental governance. For example, China passed the first environmental protection law in 1979, which stipulates that government departments at all levels from central to local should establish functional departments related to environmental protection; in 2018, the Environmental Protection Agency was promoted to the Ministry of Environmental Protection which becomes one of the constituent departments of the State Council.

Nevertheless, due to the previous one-sided emphasis on economic development and the constraints of the administrative management system, the implementation of environmental protection policies has been largely weakened. It is against this background that civil society and other governance subjects have gradually emerged.[1] Although China's authoritarian regime lacks institutionalized public participation channels, environmental non-governmental organizations, as prominent governance powers, have successfully delivered their voices.

ENGO is gradually becoming a powerful player in the field of environmental politics in China.[2] Since its emergence in the 1990s, research on it has gradually become the subject of the academia. Although the existing research clearly shows the development context of ENGO, the research focused on its action strategies is still relatively scattered and insufficient. Existing studies have focused mainly on the perspective of governance theory, emphasizing the sharing, consensus and co-

governance between ENGO and the government. There is less attention to the positive conflict between the two and the competition for power, space and discourse.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relative positions and interactions of various actors in the field of environmental governance and ENGO's action strategies within the existing institutional framework. This paper introduces a "field" research framework, and environmental governance is defined as the boundary of a large field. Field theory provides a novel perspective for explaining the flexibility and diversity of ENGO's action strategies from a dynamic, comparative and interactive perspective.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, it briefly introduces the current situation of ENGO in China. Second, it discusses the existing research on ENGO, especially on the action strategies. Through a case study of some typical ENGO environmental resistance behaviors in China, combined with the perspective of "field" theory, the behavior patterns are summarized. Finally, this article will explain the shortcomings of the research and the prospects for future research.

2. The Initiatives of ENGOs in China

ENGOs in China have played a very active role in mobilizing public participation and assisting environmental governance. They are widely involved in activities such as environmental education, nature conservation and policy initiatives, and some have even national influence. Although ENGOs have great differences in types, according to Diamond's classic definition, the activities carried out by them can be divided into six types:

1. Expressing interest claims;
2. Exchanging information;
3. Achieving collective goals;
4. Making a request to the country;
5. Improving the structure and operation of the country;
6. Accountability to government officials.[3]

Under China's existing political system, most of ENGOs' activities are limited to Type 1 to 3, which can be classified as "non-political" activities; only a very small number of ENGOs are involved in other types of activities, such as rescuing pollution victims, challenging the government's environmental governance policies, criticizing the government for negligence in governance, and initiating adversarial activities such as environmental public interest litigation.[4]

In ENGOs' adversarial activities, there are some cases of great research value. Yunnan Dian snub-nosed monkey protection activities continued for several years; Nujiang Hydropower Project was met with fierce protests from environmental organizations. ENGOs' attempts to oppose the construction of dams were quite common in the protests of previous years.

3. Literature Review on the ENGO Action Strategies

Early research on China's ENGOs mainly focused on explaining its connotation, value and proposing corresponding development strategies, such as ENGO's development model, development stage, and role[5]. Subsequent research began to gradually explore the relationship between ENGOs and the government. On the one hand, the development of ENGOs contributes to the improvement of environmental quality, on the other, the activities of ENGOs weaken the authoritarian power of the government. Although ENGOs lack institutional channels for legal participation, the two parties are in a non-confrontational relationship in general.

Existing research on ENGO's action strategies mainly focus on its role in the construction of issues and policy formulation, such as how ENGOs make full use of the media, especially the Internet and other emerging media to express their policy demands. Although some scholars have noticed the

connection between ENGOs and other actors during the policy initiatives, such as forming a so-called initiative alliance with other stakeholders. In addition to the construction of the right to speak, ENGOs also play an important coordination role in resolving group conflicts caused by the environment problems.[6]

Although academic research on the ENGO action strategies has been abundant, it fails to reveal the diversity and complexity of the ENGO action strategies. Firstly, less attention has been paid to ENGOs' competitive behavior pattern, although it has already been shown in the cases mentioned above. Secondly, many studies have only focused on the interaction between some actors in the field of environmental governance, and there is a lack of a more comprehensive investigation of stakeholders in environmental rights. Finally, regarding the interpretation framework of ENGO behavior, the perspectives of civil society theory and corporatism theory have some shortcomings. The concept of field provides a good analytical tool in explaining the position and habitus of the actors, which in turn reveals the logic behind the motivations of ENGOs' resistant actions.

4. The Analysis Framework

Civil society theory and corporatism have some flaws in explaining the relationship between the state and ENGOs. Civil society theory assumes conflict and opposition between the state and ENGOs, while corporatism overemphasizes the dominant position of the state. However, the relative positions between various agents should be in a dynamic balance. The field is a setting about the actors and their social status. The relative position of each social actors is the result of specific rules of the field, the habitus of the subject, and the interaction of capital.[7] Society as a big field is composed of many independent but interrelated sub-fields, each of which has its own rules, practices and logic.[8]

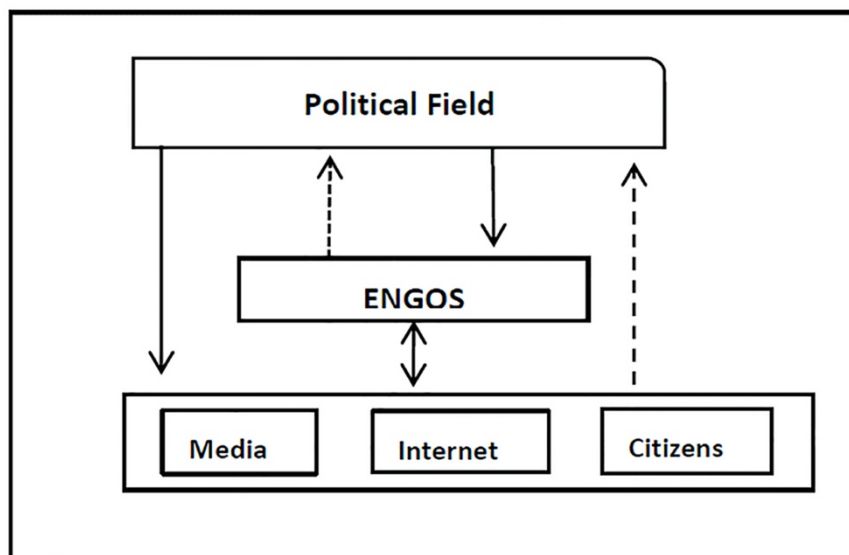


Figure 1: Field Dynamics of ENGOs.

As shown in Figure 1, the field of environmental governance contains major actors such as the government, ENGOs, media, network, and citizens. The participants of these environmental movements act independently in their respective sub-fields. However, the status of each sub-field is not equal, which is reflected in the differences in power and resource allocation. The political field (the government as the exerciser of power) usually dominates. Some fields, such as the network field, remain relatively independent, but they do not enjoy complete autonomy.

The differences in strength does not mean that the boundaries of the fields are fixed. The field perspective particularly emphasizes the relationship between fields. For example, in the context of environmental governance, the relatively weak ENGOs can form an alliance with mass media, international ENGOs or the rapidly emerging network to jointly promote an environmental agenda. There may also be conflicts of interest within the government that is the dominant player in the environmental field, thereby creating opportunities for the involvement of other fields. In such a process, the boundaries between different fields are reshaped, and the distribution of resources and power achieves a new balance.

The connection mechanism of the sub-fields is another issue to be discussed in this section. ENGOs' abilities to act are profoundly influenced by the established formal system, which some scholars refer to as "fragmented authoritarianism".[9] ENGOs, which were originally excluded from the decision-making process, now have broader action space. When there is a lack of formal participation channels, the informal social network plays the role of problem-solving mechanism. The founders of ENGOs might have personal or professional contacts with government departments to allow them to access more resources and opportunities, thereby enhancing the former's abilities to act. Although the right to define environmental issues is in the hands of the government, ENGOs still have great flexibilities in the choice of action strategies. Collective actions can be achieved through connection with other ENGOs and individual stakeholders.

The fragmented authoritarianism framework has been considered the most inspiring political hypothesis to study Chinese politics since it was first proposed in the 1980s. The framework points out that policies at the central level are often highly malleable in terms of time and space, and the results of the policies are reshaped by considering the interests of the implementers themselves. "Fragmented authoritarianism" interprets the policy process as the result of gradual changes caused by bureaucratic games.

As an amendment to fragmented authoritarianism theory, Mertha pointed out that the media, NGOs and activists who were originally sent out of the policy-making process successfully enter the political process by adapting to the structural and procedural constraints of authoritarianism and taking advantage of government fragmentation and institutional laziness.[10]

Although there is extensive room for policy change under the authoritarian 2.0 framework, two factors are still needed, namely policy entrepreneurs and problem structures. The fragmented political system has created such a space that both government and private policy entrepreneurs can run for their reasonable demands. The problem structure is the explanation that policy entrepreneurs have made to persuade potential supporters to solve the problems and this kind of explanation is generally achieved by the rhetoric of "expression" and "amplification".

5. Case Studies

The research on ENGOs' action strategies should focus on the process rather than the types of actions. No matter what background ENGOs have, international, government or private, they are all result-oriented. The current tensions related to environmental issues are mainly reflected in dam construction, wildlife protection, environmental justice and ecological compensation. Based on this, we should pay more attention to ENGOs participating in these areas in the selection of cases. This article analyses two of the most representative ENGOs through intentional sampling.

5.1. The Raging Nu River

The provisional victory of the Nujiang "Defence War" against the building of hydropower stations in 2003 is considered a typical case of civil organizations influencing the government's public policy decision process. As the convener of the influential ENGO "Green Home Volunteer", Wang

Yongchen played a very key role in it. Wang is a well-known journalist and environmentalist, and she maintains extensive private and professional contacts with people from the government, the scientific community and other influential ENGOs.

In August 2003, the National Development and Reform Commission approved the Nujiang Hydropower Planning Report submitted by Yunnan Province. However, the proposal generated great dispute as soon as it came out, and a representative of the State Environmental Protection Administration even refused to sign it. In September 2003, Wang and her other domestic media colleagues participated in a symposium on ecological protection of the Nujiang River held by the State Environmental Protection Administration, and they took the lead in calling out to protect the Nujiang River. To make full use of her personal relationship networks in the bureaucratic system, Wang not only submitted proposals to NPC and CPPCC delegates articulating her concerns about the development plan but also learned a large amount of information from Mou Guangfeng, the deputy director of the Supervision and Management Department of the Environmental Protection Bureau for the environmental impact assessment and political discussion process, which played a crucial role in the corresponding action strategies taken by Wang her allies.

In addition to that, Wang launched a series of publicity activities through the Internet with influential ENGOs like Friends of Nature calling for hydropower projects to carry out environmental impact assessments and engage stakeholders before they are launched. In order to gain public understanding and support, Wang conducted several exhibitions related to the Nu River in Beijing at her own expense, showing environmental protection concerns to the people along the Nu River scenery, so as to attract everyone to participate in the Nujiang protection movement.

To help gaining more intuitionistic and perceptual understanding of the value of natural environment, Wang led relevant experts and scholars, media reporters and environmentalists to the southwest for field visits on many occasions. The participation of relevant experts and scholars also made up for the lack of professionalism which most ENGOs might face, all parties started a fierce debate on the Nujiang hydropower development project, involving various aspects of economic development, ecological environment, immigration, ethnic culture and other aspects. Process like this facilitated the construction of legalization and the rationalization of their claims through professional and scientific judgment.

5.2. Insurmountable Tiger Leaping Gorge

In July 2004, the Tiger Leaping Gorge Water Control Project was approved by the National Development and Reform Commission. The project was expected to inundate 200 kilometres of land upstream, and about 100,000 people will be affected for this. When the news released, ENGOs and environmental activists voiced their concerns instantly. Many ENGOs in Beijing, including Green Home, Friends of Nature, Conservation International, Institute of Environment and Development, Beijing Global Village Environmental Culture Centre, WWF, and Alxa Ecological Protection Fund jointly launched the “Protection of Tiger Leaping Gorge” initiative.

Environmental activists built strong ties with news outlets in this case which contribute to the progress. ENGOs sought great help from local villagers whose livelihood was closely related to the dam project, and many details surrounding the local situation were revealed. In September 2004, the Southern Weekend report pushed the entire Tiger Leaping Gorge protection movement to the cusp of public opinion. Mainstream media at home and abroad followed up at the time, and subsequently the project became the centre of environmental protection agendas. ENGOs pointed out the impact of the dam construction on the biological and ethnic diversity of the Jinsha River and refuted the narratives of “helping the people out of poverty and the promotion of prosperity” proposed by the local authorities such as the so-called “Three Parallel Rivers” Administration. The media report highlighted

the illegality and environmental impact of the Tiger Leaping Gorge Project and provided solid evidence.

As aforementioned, the central and local government have divergent policy goals under the fragmented authoritarianism power structure, under the circumstances ENGOs also resolved to the intervention of the central government. The State Environmental Protection Administration also expressed opposition to the launch of the project, since local government agents in Yunnan failed to made sufficient argument on the environmental impact assessment of the project. Eventually, the Tiger Leaping Gorge Project was shelved with the intervention of high-level officials.

6. Conclusions

The concept of field provides a new perspective for us to rethink the interrelationship between various actors in the field of environmental governance under the fragmented authoritarian political system. ENGOs in China were perceived to be weak relative to the authoritarian state, nevertheless, the boundaries between ENGOs and other parties like the government are not pre-emptive and constant. ENGOs have great flexibility in the choice of confrontation strategies, by adapting to the political rules in the large field, they might reshape the dynamic boundaries within the environmental protection field. For example, when facing local governments, ENGOs often strive for the intervention of the central government, and directly exchanges the concessions of local governments by intervening in the top-level system and policy design.

This study illustrates the interaction between ENGOs and various actors in the areas of environmental protection and democratic prospect of Chinese politics, however there are several doubts which need further exploration. To begin with, ENGOs' action strategies are affected by their respective resource endowments, such as the degree of specialization, funding, and staff size. Whether and to what extent do these variables affect ENGO's "habitus" of action and their action abilities is worth a closer look. Secondly, ENGO resistance in these cases is mainly reflected in the weakly political and weakly organized ecological protection movement. It is still questionable whether ENGOs could play the same role in the more confrontational environmental rights movement. Finally, the given examples are all concentrated on hydroelectric development plans, more empirical evidence in other fields are needed to support the contention of this article.

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