

The Growth of Chinese Environmental Sociology*

by Dayong Hong and Chenyang Xiao

Abstract: This paper examines the characteristics and growth of Chinese environmental sociology and then predicts future developments. The authors argue that the development of environmental sociology in China can be divided into two phases: its spontaneous introduction and research without a clear disciplinary consciousness prior to the mid 1990s, and then intentional research and its construction with an increasingly clear disciplinary consciousness after the mid 1990s. At present, Chinese environmental sociology has shown its latest trends towards advancing academic research, communicating with foreign and domestic colleagues, organizing domestic colleagues, and internationalizing its research perspective. The authors believe that future developments of Chinese environmental sociology will largely depend on whether scholars in this area can effectively analyze the partial failure of environmental governance in China by looking further, digging deeper, and utilizing multi-angle perspectives in their sociological research of environmental issues.

Key words: Chinese environmental sociology, environmental governance, social transformation.

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In the past three decades, China has experienced tremendous economic growth and the people's living standard has been improved greatly along the way. But at the same time, China's environmental situation has not seen much improvement, which becomes now a great threat to China's further economic growth and to the improvement of people's living standard. It also has a great impact on global environmental changes. We observed that the Chinese government and researchers have become increasingly concerned with environmental problems. The Chinese government has set a strategic goal of a "resource-conserving and environment-friendly society," while researchers in the area of environmental sociology are making steady progress. In this paper, we will present an effort to define the discipline of Chinese environmental sociology, to examine its path of growth, and to predict its future developments.

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1. Defining Chinese Environmental Sociology

First we must clarify that *Chinese* here refers to Mainland China that does not include areas such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, where environmental sociology has been developing almost simultaneously with environmental sociology in the Western world. Especially in Taiwan ever since the 1980s (Xiao, Xinhuan, 1980), environmental sociology has achieved great accomplishments in both teaching and research in this discipline. Unfortunately, there has been very little academic interaction across the strait up to until very recently.

Therefore, by “Chinese environmental sociology” we mean to designate such a sub-discipline of sociology within the mainland part of China that is focused on the sociological research of environmental problems. More specifically, we believe Chinese environmental sociology has the following two distinctive aspects.

One. *Chinese environmental sociology is distinctive when compared to Western environmental sociology, especially the environmental sociology in the USA.*

Environmental sociology in the West, especially in the USA, started its development by drastically challenging mainstream sociology. A new theoretical perspective, named the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) by William R. Catton and Riley E. Dunlap (1979), came into being. It has since become the theoretical foundation that organized environmental sociology.

Catton and Dunlap pointed out that although in sociology since Durkheim there has been a lot of theoretical divergence, most sociologists seem to agree upon the same perspective of anthropocentrism. In other words, human beings and their culture are seen as exceptional—the Human Exceptionalism Paradigm. It was because of this HEP that sociologists were largely silent facing the increasingly threatening environmental problems during the 1960s and 1970s. Sociologists therefore needed urgently to rethink the existing sociological paradigm, and started paying more attention to the environmental dimension of social research, which means adopting a new research paradigm and examining environmental factors’ influences on social systems. Catton and Dunlap’s work on the NEP established the foundation of environmental sociology as a branch of sociology, and remained influential later in the development of Western environmental sociology (Buttel, 1996; Mol, 2006).

Unlike Western environmental sociology, Chinese environmental sociology did not start with a drastic criticism of mainstream sociology, nor with the construction of a new research paradigm. We believe that this partially owes to the characteristics of Chinese sociology in general. Even though historically sociology as a discipline was introduced into China from the West, it was inevitably influenced by Chinese culture and tradition. As a result, sociologists in China have always paid close attention to the influences of environmental factors on social structure and changes. Environmental factors are always treated as an important constituent of social systems and an important condition of social change. For instance, community research, a very significant branch of sociology in China before 1949, obviously incorporated environmental factors into sociological research.

On the other hand, in the 1970s when sociology in China was reconstructed after a

26-year ban, environmental issues were attracting attention from all around the world and started to become salient in China as well. To a certain extent we can say that the reconstruction of Chinese sociology was accompanied by the increasingly degraded Chinese environment. Chinese sociologists had no choice but to confront this hard reality and begin research on environmental issues, even though sociological research specifically targeting environmental issues did not emerge until more recently.

As a matter of fact several influential sociologists in their definitions of the research object of sociology had already expressed the realization of the necessity to study environmental issues within sociology. For example, Prof. Hangsheng Zheng (1985) once explicitly pointed out that “sociology is a general (*vs. specialized*) social science discipline focusing on the conditions and mechanisms for the optimization of social change and coordinated social development.” Such a definition of sociology means that sociologists need to keep a close eye on the impacts environmental factors have on social processes and changes. As a result, Zheng and his research team have always paid close attention to the analysis of environmental conditions of social development in a series of research studies (e.g., Zheng and Li, 1993).

Thus, with such an environment-friendly tradition in Chinese sociology, the birth of environmental sociology in China did not have to mean a break with the mainstream, and constructing a new research paradigm through debating with mainstream sociology was not a precondition for establishing environmental sociology either. In fact, Chinese environmental sociology as a sub-discipline of sociology mainly developed along the process in which sociologists identify new research topics and advocate that we need to apply sociological knowledge and research methods to environmental study. Therefore it is the core notion of exploring the social dimension of environmental issues that attracts and organizes all environmental sociologists in China, which is the key difference between Chinese and Western and American environmental sociology. On the other hand, as some scholars pointed out (e.g., Mol, 2006), there may be some similarities between Chinese and European environmental sociology in contrast to American sociology.

Two. Chinese environmental sociology is distinctive compared to other environmental research.

In China, just like everywhere else, the early stage of environmental research was mainly dominated by natural and technical sciences where environmental issues tended to be seen as technical problems that could be settled by technical means. In fact, even in the mid 1990s there were still complaints about such domination. One scholar pointed out that, compared to the natural sciences which conduct environmental research, social sciences were treated like second or third-class citizens from certain points of view (Xu, Songling, 1996).

Despite such domination, environmental research in the natural and technical sciences have well-known limitations. Forerunners in social sciences thus began to study environmental issues from a social science perspective and developed several important sub-disciplines of environmental research in the social sciences, such as environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, environmental economics, environmental legal research, environmental political science, and environmental sociology. Among them, environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, environmental economics, and environmental legal

research are relatively more mature, while environmental political science and environmental sociology are still under construction.

Compared to other academic disciplines in China, environmental sociology started rather late, but it has become a unique sub-discipline of social science with the following distinctive characteristics.

A. As a sub-discipline in social science, Chinese environmental sociology specifically emphasizes the social causes of environmental issues.

Especially when compared to environmental research in the natural and technical sciences, environmental sociology pays more attention to the interaction between the environment and society, and emphasizes more the human factors in environmental degradation, particularly the negative influences of the ongoing drastic and deep social changes in China on its environment (Hong, 2001a).

This characteristic is similar to the one of Western environmental sociology in that environmental sociology also grew out of the reflection and criticisms of environmental research in the natural sciences. The most typical examples are the reviews and criticisms of Paul Ehrlich's Malthusianism and Barry Commoner's Technicalism (e.g., Schnaiberg, 1980; Dunlap, 1994).

B. As a branch of sociology, Chinese environmental sociology pays more attention to the comprehensive and complicated nature of social factors in environmental problems.

As a significant branch of social science, sociology tends to look at the changes of society as a whole and the individuals in such a total society. Thus sociological research has a unique synthetical angle. In other words, unlike other social science disciplines such as political science, economics, and legal research, sociology is *not* limited to any subsystem within a society but rather concerns itself with the entire social system and the relationships between the whole social system and its subsystems, among different subsystems, and at different levels. So relative to environmental research in economics, political science, and legal research, environmental sociological research tends to analyze environmental issues more with a comprehensive and holistic perspective.

In environmental sociology, environmental issues are not simply due to the malfunction of certain societal subsystems, but actually have more complicated reasons and mechanisms that could combine technical causes, social structural reasons, and factors in the social value system. In fact, as early as the 1970s, Dunlap and Catton (1979), two of the founders of environmental sociology, had already pointed out the complexity and interconnectedness in multiple causes of environmental issues, using the concept of "ecological complex" borrowed from Otis Dudley Duncan (1961). Chinese environmental sociology largely followed this tradition.

C. As a branch of sociology, environmental sociology tends to focus more on the environment's influences on concrete social processes.

Sociology does not only concern the social structure, but also social processes and it pays attention to social institutions in terms of both their abstract forms and empirical

operations. Such a unique analytical perspective of sociology is fully embraced by environmental sociologists.

Compared to other environmental social sciences (such as environmental economics and environmental legal research, especially the latter which has its basic focus on environmental laws and regulations), environmental sociology, through its detailed analysis of concrete processes of environmental degradation and management, can provide much more specific insights. This can help increase our understanding of environmental issues and contribute to better environmental policies. We observed that several researchers had made many insightful contributions to analyzing 1) the implementation process of environmental policies and 2) the social causes of environmental problems (e.g., Lin, Mei, 2001).

D. As a branch of sociology, environmental sociology emphasizes empirical research

Sociology to a large extent is an empirical science. Sociological research is traditionally based on empirical surveys and analyses. From this point of view, sociology is significantly different from disciplines such as philosophy. Environmental sociology inherits this tradition of an emphasis on empirical investigation that distinguishes it from other environmental social sciences. It is especially clear when compared to environmental philosophy and environmental ethics, which tend to have a strong abstract and metaphysical orientation and focus more on the meta-general patterns in the relationship between human society and its environment. Environmental sociology instead tends to focus on more concrete and detailed patterns in the society-environment interaction through applying sociological empirical methodology and gathering and analyzing empirical data. However, on a more theoretical level, environmental sociology and the other environmental social sciences are connected and complementary to each other.

2. The Growth Path of Chinese Environmental Sociology

Compared to the development of Western environmental sociology that began in the 1970s, Chinese environmental sociology started considerably later. Although environmental sociology as a discipline was first introduced into China in the early 1980s, the bulk of Chinese environmental sociology literature did not start to emerge until after the mid 1990s, especially after the beginning of the 21st century.

Through examining the relationship between research development and disciplinary development of Chinese environmental sociology, we believe that the growth path of this newly emerged sub-discipline since 1980s can be divided at the mid 1990s into two phases. Phase one started from the beginning to the mid 1990s, in which Chinese environmental sociologists conducted their own spontaneous research without obvious disciplinary consciousness. In phase two from the mid 1990s, Chinese environmental sociologists began their research with an increasingly clear disciplinary consciousness and the development of Chinese environmental sociology as an academic discipline started. As of now, we have observed several new trends in the latest development of Chinese environmental sociology.

2.1 Phase One. The Spontaneous Introduction and Research without a Clear Disciplinary Consciousness

According to the current Chinese environmental sociology literature we have on hand, in 1982 Juxin Di and Jian Shen translated and published an article that was originally published by Dunlap and Catton in the *Annual Review of Sociology* in 1979. That was the very first article of environmental sociology ever published in mainland China since the reconstruction of Chinese sociology. From then on to the mid 1990s, the literature of Chinese environmental sociology mainly consisted of the following four types of articles. First, there were brief introductions to and descriptions of the discipline of environmental sociology. Second, there were some descriptions of foreign academic conferences of environmental sociology. For instance, in 1992 the “Environment and Society” Workgroup of the International Sociological Association held an academic meeting in the Netherlands to discuss the developing trends of environmental sociology. At this meeting, the Research Committee on Environment and Society (RC24) was formally established. Several scholars translated and edited introductions and descriptions of this particular meeting (e.g., Li, Zao, 1993; Feng, Guilin, 1994). Third, translations of foreign environmental sociology articles were done. Besides the aforementioned ones translated by Di and Shen, Ni Liu in 1990 translated an article by William .R. Freudenburg (1989) on the formation of environmental sociology in the USA and the significant contribution made by Riley Dunlap and William Catton. Fourth, scholars published sociological research studies on environmental issues (e.g., Ma, Guoqing, 1993; Lu, Shuhua, 1994; Hong, Dayong, 1995). We believe that these sociological studies highlighted the first phase of the development of Chinese environmental sociology, showing that Chinese sociologists had great concern about environmental issues.

However, generally speaking in this first phase Chinese environmental sociologists did not have a clear disciplinary consciousness. Researchers involved in environmental sociology research did not seem to realize that they were constructing a new sociological sub-discipline. At most during their spontaneous research of environmental issues, scholars noticed that sociology can provide a unique perspective for environmental research, and therefore can make distinctive contributions.

2.2 Phase Two. Discipline-Conscious Research and the Construction of Chinese Environmental Sociology

Through researchers’ spontaneous research and construction efforts, Chinese environmental sociology as a discipline was largely established around the mid 1990s. We reviewed the literature in this field since then and found several clear characteristics of this second phase of Chinese environmental sociology.

First, there was a clear and explicit realization of the need to establish a discipline of environmental sociology in China and the effort to clearly identify such a discipline began (e.g., Ma, Rong, 1998; Hong, Dayong, 1999).

Second, scholars started to systematically introduce and study the development of environmental sociology in Western countries. Two critical publications of this type include Cheyang Xiao *et al.* ’s (1998) translation of *Environment and Society: Human Perspectives on Environmental Issues* written by Charles Harper, an American environmental sociologist, and Zhiming Bao’s (1999) translation of *Environmental Sociology* published by Nobuko

Iijima from Japan. Other scholars also made important contributions to the construction of the discipline through systematic introductions of Western environmental sociological theories, research paradigms, and research on environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Third, scholars started editing textbooks and offering courses on environmental sociology that were independent of offerings from the Western world. Since the mid 1990s, more and more schools began to offer environmental sociology courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Along with the growth of teaching and research in environmental sociology, several preliminary textbooks were published, which can be seen as milestones in the process of discipline construction.

Fourth, more and more empirical research focusing on the current environmental conditions of China emerged. These studies can be seen as one major step toward constructing middle-range theories, to use Robert Merton's term, in Chinese environmental sociology (e.g., Hong, Dayong, 2001a, 2001b, 2006; Li, Shuqing *et al.*, 2001; Lin, Mei, 2001; Tao, Chuanjin, 2005; Lu, Yilong, 2004; Jiang, Ying, 2007; Wang, Fang, 2007).

More specifically, Hong in his "*Social Change and Environmental Problems in China*" (2001a) discussed in great detail the mechanisms and processes of the interaction between environment and human society under the circumstances of rapid social transformation in China in an attempt to explore the general social causes of environmental degradation in China. Hong (2001a) suggested that environmental protection policy should be based on social organization innovation and social structure optimization. Mei Lin (2001), through studying the environmental policy implementation process in Dongting Lake area of Hunan province, specifically examined the implementation issue of environmental policies, and explored the important mechanisms, as well as the conditions for the existence and functioning of such mechanisms, of implementing environmental policies. Shuqing Li *et al.* (2001) conducted empirical research focusing on regional environmental issues and published a book titled "*Environmental Sociology in a Drought Area.*" In this book Li *et al.* (2001) adopted a cross-sectional, comparative method and examined the interactions among economic society, ecological environment, and human behaviors in drought areas. Based on these empirical investigations, Li and his colleagues (2001) formed a preliminary analytical framework of environmental sociology specifically designed for drought areas. Chuanjin Tao (2005) in his book, "*Environmental Governance: Community Bases,*" empirically analyzed the different roles of government, the market, and the community in environmental governance. He discussed a strategy of advancing environmental protection through promoting community cooperation and improving community management.

We can see through the aforementioned literature that Chinese environmental sociologists' disciplinary consciousness has grown very strong since mid 1990s. Owing to these scholars' collective efforts, Chinese environmental sociology has made outstanding progress and a preliminary disciplinary framework is now coming into being.

2.3 The Latest Trends in Chinese Environmental Sociology

Looking back at the growth path of Chinese environmental sociology, we can see that it is showing several new trends toward advancing academic research, communicating with foreign and domestic colleagues, organizing domestic colleagues, and internationalizing its research perspective. These trends indicate that Chinese environmental sociology is

maturing steadily.

The trend of advancing environmental research has two aspects. First, Chinese environmental sociologists have become more and more theoretically sophisticated. More specifically, now we see scholars begin to explore details of the environment-society interaction within Chinese society and along with this process the theoretical basis of Chinese environmental sociology. Second, scholars are now conducting in-depth empirical research on multiple fronts including environmental concern, environmental behavior, the social reasons behind environmental issues, and the implementation of environmental policies. Efforts in empirical research have already led to many inspiring sociological insights about environmental issues.

In terms of communicating, there are also two aspects. On the one hand, Chinese scholars have begun to communicate with foreign colleagues, learning and borrowing ideas from foreign colleagues' studies to apply to China's environmental issues. There are comparative studies reporting similarities and dissimilarities in research findings on some common research topics as well as efforts to rethink theoretical frameworks, for instance the research on the general public's environmental concern (e.g., Hong, 2006). On the other hand, Chinese researchers have begun to communicate among one another on some common topics, for instance the discussion about the research perspectives of Chinese environmental sociology. These communications show that Chinese environmental sociologists are now stepping out of their isolated individual research efforts into the stage of cooperating with each other. The consciousness of an academic union is coming into being.

The trend of organizing refers to the increasingly close connections formed among Chinese environmental sociologists. A milestone in this trend is the very first Chinese Environment Sociology Conference held in Beijing in November 2006. Sponsored by the Sociology Department and Center for Studies of Sociological Theory & Method at Renmin University of China, this conference attracted more than 50 researchers representing more than 30 educational, academic, and publishing agencies from over 20 provinces in China. Conference participants all agreed that we should push to strengthen the academic union of Chinese environmental sociologists, to organize a new professional association of Chinese environmental sociology or an environmental sociology research network, to establish regular and institutionalized academic interactions, and to jointly further the development of Chinese environmental sociology.

As to the internationalizing trend of Chinese environmental sociology, we mainly mean that environmental sociology in China is gathering more and more attention from around the world. A milestone in this regard was the first International Conference of Environmental Sociology in China 2007 held in Beijing June 30 – July 1 2007. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Center for Studies of Sociological Theory & Method of Renmin University, the Sociology Department of Renmin University, the Sociology Department of Hohai University, and the Environment and Society Research Committee of the International Sociological Association. More than 120 researchers came from more than a dozen nations including the U.S.A., Canada, the U.K., France, Germany, Austria, Italy, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Iran, and China, as well as regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan of China. This conference not only demonstrated Chinese environmental sociologists' efforts to internationalize Chinese environmental sociology in China, but also attracted the attention of

the international environmental sociology community concerning the development of Chinese environmental sociology.

3. The Future Development of Chinese Environmental Sociology

Although environmental sociology in China has made substantial progress as discussed above, it still has a long way to go to become a mature sub-discipline of sociology. We believe it is most urgent for us now to further clarify the core concept and identify several main research topics of this discipline so as to lay a solid foundation for a sustainable development of Chinese environmental sociology. So, what should be the core concept and main research topics of Chinese environmental sociology?

3.1 The Core Concept and Important Topics of Chinese Environmental Sociology

We believe that the core concept of Chinese environmental sociology should still be the notion that it is necessary to recognize and insist on the existence of a mutually constraining and influencing relationship between environment and society, which would in turn serve as the base for emphasizing the social dimension within environmental research. However, this core concept needs to be specified further for Chinese environmental sociology.

Given that environment-society interaction is historical, periodical, and regional, such interaction tends to have very specific mechanisms, forms, and characteristics under different social formations within different developing periods of a society. It's thus especially necessary for Chinese environmental sociology to examine the interaction between China's ongoing social transformation and environmental changes, and explore the influence of such special social transformation processes on the environment in China's contemporary social context, as well as various influences of the environment on the process of social transformation in China.

In a broad sense, the whole modernization process of China since the mid 19th century till now could be regarded as a process of social transformation. Along this process, Chinese society strays farther and farther away from the so-called traditional oriental society and resembles more and more a Western-style modern society, although Chinese society today is still far from a fully Westernized modern society.

In a narrower sense, by a social transformation process we mean mainly the process of deep social changes in China since the end of 1970s. This process has been occurring in the context of globalization, and thus can be seen as a special phase of Chinese modernization. The social transformation induced by such social changes has several outstanding aspects. First, the social form of Chinese society is changing from a centrally controlled one to a pluralistic and open one. Second, in terms of resource distribution a planned economy is transforming into a market economy. Third, the overall industrial structure is changing from agriculture into manufacturing and the service sector. Fourth, the formerly rural-dominated residency structure is migrating into an increasingly urbanized structure. Fifth, the formerly administration-dominated social control system is changing into a multi-format system. And finally, the social value system is switching from collectivism and asceticism to individualism and consumerism. We believe with such a society transforming entirely into a new one, the impacts of social changes on the Chinese environment are undoubtedly both

tremendous and far-reaching.

Hong (2001a) once pointed out that, on the one hand, this social transformation brought about many negative impacts on the environment, greatly offsetting the practical effects of environmental governance. These impacts are important causes of the continuous deterioration of the Chinese environment with distinctive characteristics. On the other hand, such social transformation is also pushing China to become more open and join the international community of nations, attracting more and more attention to her environmental issues along the way. This actually shows that the emergence of environmental issues is a result of certain social processes. In other words, to some extent, environmental issues are socially constructed (e.g., Hannigan, 1995). More importantly, social transformation also means social reorganization. Therefore, we need to not only reflect on the environmental policies enacted on the basis of the former social organization system, but also ride on the overall social reorganization trend to promote organizational innovations and encourage public participation so as to improve environmental governance and advance sustainable development.

We argue that, to keep pushing Chinese environmental sociology forward, we must insist firmly on the core concept of the interaction between social transformation and environmental changes and then conduct continuous in-depth research focusing on several important topics. The question is: what will be the important topics that are going to facilitate further development of Chinese environmental sociology? Hong (1999) once argued that “the social causes and influences of environmental problems” is such a topic. At present, we believe Hong’s topic can be clarified more specifically and accurately as “the partial failure of environmental governance within China’s social transformation.” We further argue that this topic should at least be one of the most important topics in Chinese environmental sociology.

3.2 The Partial Failure of Environmental Governance in China

We need to first realize that China did and still does have environmental governance during the transformation period. It is generally believed that China’s environmental governance started from the beginning of the 1970s (e.g., Qu, Geping 1992; Xie, Zhenhua, 1992)) at the same time when the global concern over environmental governance emerged. Since then, the Chinese government has been advancing its environmental governance gradually while promoting economic and social developments. As of today, with regard to some main indexes, China’s environmental governance has been largely institutionalized. For example, the environmental legislations, institutions, and staff support have all been growing steadily (State Environmental Protection Administration of China, 1995-2005).

However, the real trouble is that while the Chinese government is strengthening its environmental governance, at the same time such environmental governance has only had very limited effects. Only some partial issues of certain regions were attended to and improved, whereas the environmental situation as a whole has hardly improved but instead remains critical. This shows that Chinese environmental governance is to a certain extent malfunctioning. Given the environmental degradation in China, we believe that the aforementioned malfunctioning itself is a major practical problem we must confront in China’s environmental protection today. This is also a major theoretical topic that requires

in-depth analysis and research for Chinese environmental sociology to mature eventually. We believe that the deeper we dig into this topic, the better chance Chinese environmental sociology has to achieve substantive breakthroughs and advances, and thus more likely to become a worthy independent discipline.

In order to investigate deeper into the failure of China's environmental governance today, we need to on the one hand harness the strength of sociological empirical methods to survey and analyze the implementation process of environmental governance at the individual, group, regional, national, and even global levels. This would enable us to accumulate needed empirical data to explore the logic and mechanisms of environmental governance in reality, to discuss specific measures for the improvement of environmental governance, and to develop a sociological approach to environmental issues. On the other hand, we also need to make full use of the strength of theoretical analysis and synthesis in sociology and of the sociological imagination (Mills, 2001) in order to conduct in-depth analyses of the modes of China's environmental governance, as well as the economic, political, cultural, social and international context. The goal is to discover the basic characteristics and internal limitations of China's environmental governance and then discuss possible paths toward more effective environmental governance. We hope that through these studies, Chinese environmental sociology will be able to provide unique insights with regards to environmental issues, and thus establish itself as a valuable independent discipline.

In our view, the current environmental governance in China is prematurely inaugurated, externally induced, formality-dominated, and utterly fragile, which are the main reasons for its partial failure. In addition, we argue more importantly that the mode of China's environmental governance to date still has an internal structural defect, namely the incompleteness of the governing subject.

It is well known that today China's environmental governance is mainly driven by the government whereas the public, supposedly the main entity of environmental governance, is largely ignored. As a result, the public's intentional participation in environmental governance is far from adequate, and also severely limited by the lack of various conditions and opportunities. Hong (2001a) once analyzed the limitations of such a government-dominated environmental governance mode and pointed out the inevitability of its failure. Hong then proposed policies to improve environmental governance by organizational innovation, optimizing the structure of environmental governance, and encouraging public participation. We believe Hong's proposal still bears much theoretical and practical significance today.

However, through more recent observations and analyses of public participation in environmental governance, we believe that there is now a more practical way to improve the effectiveness of environmental governance, which is to encourage more public participation through guaranteeing the public's rights to rationally uphold their environmental rights and interests.

We observed that with the rapid economic growth and great improvement in people's living standards, more and more people are beginning to concern themselves with the quality of living and are paying more and more attention to protect their environmental rights and interests. When their environmental rights are infringed, people are more and more likely to take practical actions to express their dissatisfaction and seek compensation. There are

therefore rapidly increasing environmental conflicts in our country. Since 1995, complaints, environmental conflicts, and appeals received by environmental protection agencies have increased greatly. Especially since 2002, although the total number of environmental pollution and damaging events somewhat decreased, the complaints received have been increasing by 13% every year (State Environmental Protection Administration of China, 1995-2006). Furthermore, sometimes some people adopted extreme means to defend their environmental rights and interests that led to salient group events. Such group events are also on the rise.

Unlike means of pure propaganda that attempt to enlighten the public's environmental protection consciousness and establish environmental protection values so as to encourage the public's voluntary participation, we argue that a direct response to public environmental complaints and appeals makes better sense. Such a mode of environmental governance that protects the public's environmental rights effectively is directly linked to individuals' personal interests. If we do not simply restrain or ignore public environmental appeals, but instead develop a fairer, more reasonable, and efficient system to respond to the increasing environmental appeals of the public, we can indeed incorporate the general public into the practice of environmental governance and harness the public's power in order to improve the effectiveness of governance.

Looking into future, we predict that the research of Chinese environmental sociology will be expanded to cover a much broader area, will utilize many more perspectives, and will dig much deeper into China's environmental issues. We expect Chinese environmental sociologists to look into the partial failure of China's environmental governance and protection and along the way Chinese environmental sociology will mature into a sophisticated academic sub-discipline and positively contribute to the development of international environmental sociology.

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